*Article*

# Research failure, crip temporalities and bipolar time in UK higher education

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## Abstract

In this article we propose an understanding of failure in academic research through the lens of cripped temporalities, outlining our original concept of 'bipolar time'. Situated within the increasingly pressured context of UK higher education (UKHE), we move beyond literature that reframes failure as a step towards success. We foreground the affective experience of a (failed) empirical project exploring young LGBTAQ+ people's engagement with TikTok, emphasising the painful reality of research failure, particularly for disabled academics. We argue that the 'manic' chrononormativity of UKHE, with its relentless demands for speed and productivity, connects and conflicts with the fluctuating and unpredictable realities of (disabled) academics' lives. Building upon work on crip time, we propose the concept of 'bipolar time' to address the challenge of describing non-chrononormativity without reproducing rhythm as the organising principle of these other or broken times. Ultimately, bipolar time offers an original framework for understanding how time, illness and accelerating contexts construct the experience of failure. We conclude by calling for a radical acceptance of failure as something unavoidable, recognition that it will attach more readily and more frequently to minoritised and problematised groups and individuals, and – acknowledging that it hurts – as something which we need to routinely provide care to one another for.

## Introduction

Drawing on a recent research project that failed to deliver its planned outcomes, we reflect on how our methods, designed to match the form of children and young people's social media use, failed to account for the slow, immersive time required

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to fully understand their digital engagement. This failure, we argue, was not simply a methodological oversight but a manifestation of the multiple, competing temporalities at play, namely: the urgent timeline of funders, the manic pace of the neoliberal academy, the 'wayward paths' of child time (Bond Stockton, 2009) and the broken time of disability and illness. We refuse to 'reclaim' our project's failure by framing it as a learning experience. Instead, we embrace pain and complexity to explore the personal and structural factors which constructed the affective experience of failure. Our approach centres the fact that failure hurts. In academia, where professional and personal identities are often deeply entwined, it hurts not just professionally, but personally. This hurt combines self-doubt, internalised ableism and a sense of profound loss. We know that for disabled academics in particular, the fear of failure is amplified by the persistent societal characterisation of disability as 'failure' – a failure to thrive, to adapt or to keep pace. By engaging with cripped conceptualisations of time and scrutiny of neoliberal, chrononormative standards of success in UK higher education (HE), we propose 'bipolar time' as an enhanced conceptualisation of crip time which provides a framework to acknowledge and sit with failure as a multi-directional temporality. In a time of accelerating and intensifying work demands, we suggest bipolar time offers an essential frame to think beyond linear conceptualisations of time and progress in order to foster more compassionate conversations about failure, illness and non-productive work.

## Understanding failure and time in research

Failure is not a missing discussion in academia; there's a worthy stable of work sharing failures and discussion of research or career 'setbacks' (Borgstrom et al., 2023; Broeckerhoff & Lopes, 2020; Harrowell et al., 2018). Increasingly, studies have scrutinised the tendency for failure to be deployed only in highly individualised 'triumph over adversity' narratives, which reify neoliberal imperatives of success rather than trouble the impacts of labelling people or experiences as failures (Horton, 2020, p. 2). Despite these robust critiques, failure routinely appears in social science work as part of a brief, tidy list of obstacles which were eventually navigated, or moments of learning which are flagged for the future. Methods sections discuss failure to recruit as instructive for future approaches to engagement, and failure to collect expected data as a lesson in more thorough literature reviewing and consultation. In the day-to-day conduct of research, failure is typically presented as the result of poor preparation or execution, and a thing we should work to prevent in the future (Lammes et al., 2023, p. 14). These trends point to the difficulty of speaking about failure without delivering a 'redemptive happy ending' (Horton, 2020, p. 3). Attempts to offer an alternative narrative to speak about and acknowledge failure, which do not serve a neoliberal framework, are challenging in the face of overwhelming demands for productivity and excellence. Work that grapples with this variously considers failure as a 'productive way of being in the world' which is part of a researcher's journey (Lammes et al., 2023, p. 14), or an essential heuristic to identify the exclusions and inequities the current system of academic success is based upon (Horton, 2020). Similarly, theories of queer failure suggest that not feeling *good* about research can be a prompt to demand change of conditions in the academy: for some people, failure to fit in becomes a powerful outsider position from which to challenge and

disrupt (Halberstam, 2011). However, in all of this worthy reframing and critique, one fact can slip from our focus: failure hurts.

Failure is not simply an intellectual curiosity or a productivity metric, it sticks to certain bodies and not others and is 'enmeshed with actual loss' informed by 'the lived catastrophe of failure for (some) disabled people' (Johnson, 2015, pp. 255, 253). Horton (2020) calls on scholars to think-with-failure, considering how feelings of failure intersect with disability and how this influences who speaks about it (p. 5). Thus, we begin with our focus on the affective reality of failure and the ableism of the neoliberal academy that contextualises it. Disability is persistently characterised as failure – failure to thrive, failure of body or mind to develop, to have capacity, ability, flexibility; failure to adapt at the speed and in the ways expected and demanded of us (Evans et al., 2024; Kafer, 2013). Some narratives of disability – such as the super crip – are about 'overcoming' this failure (see Schalk, 2016), although this is only permitted for some bodies (Puar, 2017, p. xvi). Crip scholarship directs us to question how and why the framework for success has been constructed to exclude 'unproductive' disability (Kafer, 2021; Rodgers et al., 2023). These intellectual and activist challenges are instructive for disabled people grappling with their own worth and place in the world, but it is not straightforward to reject ableist narratives of your intrinsic failure. In the context of neoliberal higher education, failure threatens the stability and continuity of our employment. On funded projects, the realisation of (unproductive) failure chimes with the previous UK Conservative government's threat to defund exploratory and creative scholarship and teaching on the grounds it is, or will be, 'low value' (Adams & Allegretti, 2023). Thus, for disabled academics, failure can seem to confirm the internalised ableism which haunts our work (see Chazan, 2023; Evans et al., 2024; Stone et al., 2013): we are not just 'less reliable' or 'less able to deliver on project' than abled colleagues, we are also failing to pull our weight in the fight against ideological challenges to the very work of universities. Failure can be, or feel, 'uninhabitable', and optimistic or playful theories of failure can (ironically) fail to acknowledge this or offer a way to balance the potentially productive place of chosen failure with the distress and pain that failure which 'chooses us' can bring (Nyong'o, 2012).

Failure cannot be disentangled from time. Urgency from funders and institutions to produce 'responsive' research creates conditions in which failure is all the more unacceptable, while offering less and less space for the reflection, listening and evaluation we are advised will help to inoculate against research failures. Interruptions and delays in the conduct of research projects, write up and distribution of findings are similarly correlated with failing. The linear, orderly progression of time, described by the critical term 'chrononormativity'[1] (Freeman, 2010, p. 3), is the framework by which success – and the reclamation of failure – is structured. But failure does not always move us forward or shed light on a hitherto unexplored problem. Failure can move us backwards, bring us to a total halt, or catapult us away from the location of that pain.

In the context of increasing instability in UKHE, uncertain financial futures and a prevailing atmosphere of threat and anxiety (Humphrey & Coleman-Fountain, 2024, p. 237; Loveday, 2018), there can be no expectation of linear, predictable progression to success: such a trajectory has only ever been obtainable for a minority of researchers, if at all. In the UK, the contraction of social welfare (especially as it impacts disabled

people; Gross & Pickard, 2025), long-term underfunding of public health services, and ideologically driven bans on commissioning of treatments and services for trans youth (Milton & Hooper, 2024) collectively indicate increasing uncertainty in access to healthcare for researchers and research participants. These contexts appear to demand urgency, as reflected in time-limited or rapid response funding calls, continual research quality evaluation exercises, and expedited implementation of unprecedented restrictions on existing treatments. We are directed to act swiftly to understand, address and resolve the problems of the now – ideally before the conditions shift again and we variously lose our jobs to redundancy, become too unwell to work, or are excluded from accessing healthcare. Resultingly, the space between 'what we are trying to do or are supposed to be doing' and what we can concretely be said to have achieved and discovered leaves no time to grasp or process either success or failure (Sjøvoll et al., 2020, p. 2). Time accelerates, contracts and collapses in on itself. Chrononormativity describes a normative (but not normal) ordering of time. We therefore argue that the chrononormativity of UKHE, as it exists in relation to social and political contexts, is *manic*. Overwork and urgency are the normative experience for academics, and conforming to these strictures of time is rewarded through the systems of recognition in universities which seek to extract ever more from ever fewer human resources.

Engaging studies from Mountz et al. (2015) and others (Bailey, 2021; Hartman & Darab, 2012; Martell, 2014; Shahjahan, 2015) have proposed a strategic slowing down of work as a form of resistance to these conditions in higher education. Much of Mountz et al.'s (2015) argument concerns the fostering of care and intellectual creativity, which comes with a conscious choice to slow down and allow the same of others (pp. 1248–1249). While we find this argument compelling in its call for solidarity against the intensifying pressures of higher education and the reminder of our agency under this regime, it offers only a binary conceptualisation of time. While *slowing down* can be an act of resistance to a system demanding our productivity and urgency, not all of us occupy the same temporal starting point; more time can feel like punishment, not empowerment (Evans et al., 2024, p. 13; Kafer, 2021, p. 421). Disability creates its own temporalities which intersect with and are distinct from the demands of the academy. We cannot always choose the speed at which we work: people with bipolar, for example, cannot opt to 'work slowly' when their mind is racing and the sensation of crawling in their brain compels them to move. They cannot opt to 'catch up' when their mind slows, and thinking is like wading through treacle. While Mountz et al. (2015) acknowledge illness as a consequence of working conditions in the academy and cite the relentless pace of work as a factor that makes recovering from illness harder (p. 1246), they do not capture the simultaneous slowdowns, speedups and asynchronous and disorientating temporalities which characterise crip time (Rodgers et al., 2023, p. 1485).

Crip time began as a term in activist circles used to acknowledge a slower speed of movement and the additional time disabled people might need to navigate ableist barriers (Kafer, 2013, p. 27). Crip time has been critically expanded to acknowledge flexible time as an 'accommodation' but also a 'challenge to normative and normalising expectations of pace and scheduling' (Kafer, 2013, p. 27). But, as Kafer (2021) has later argued, crip time has too often been reduced (and co-opted by capitalism) to mean '*more time* as a way of mobilizing disabled people into productivity rather than transforming systems'

(p. 421). Kafer instead directs us to think beyond 'specific speeds, towards as yet unimagined imaginaries' (Kafer, 2021). We argue that failure has similarly been reduced to a binary; provocative work on the potential of locating disruption and challenge in failure has been collapsed into a narrative in which failure is 'good' because it offers a step towards a happy resolution through moderate hardship and critical evaluation in service of problem-solving or systematic reform (Horton, 2020; Whittle et al., 2020). This is a future-orientated response to failure that engages what crip scholarship terms a 'curative imaginary' which 'not only expects and assumes intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention' (Kafer, 2013, p. 27) and with it, the resolution of the failure into success.

In their compelling piece, Whittle et al. (2020) argue that failure must be 'experienced in the present tense' and propose means by which this can be achieved. We go further and argue here that failure must be retained as an experience which is simultaneously in the past, present *and* future: *failure has a temporality which is multiple*. Failure, like disability, can be understood as 'anomaly, as catastrophe, [but also] endemic, as daily' (Kafer, 2021, p. 424). Past failure haunts futures, present failures threaten to undermine past successes, and future failure paralyses the present. What is needed is an approach to understanding failure not as something which can be avoided, reworked, redeemed or reframed, nor as something guaranteed by fast paced work or avoided with slow work, but as a *multi-directional temporality*.

To unpick this thorny place of neither now nor then, always and never, we draw on a provocation from Sjøvoll et al. (2020): that openness is necessary and can be achieved by 'transgressing the barriers between the messy realities of life and the ordered and enclosed formulas of academic thinking and writing' (p. 2). We therefore offer a proposal for a temporally aware approach to failure through reflection on our lived experience of the illness and disability of the PI (Lizzie), when conducting an empirical project which 'failed'. The scope of this reflection is necessarily limited by the positionality of the authors: we thus note our whiteness as a caution against suggesting the reflection that follows is representative of the experience of all disabled academics in UKHE. Lewis and Arday (2023), for example, offer an essential critique of the whitening of neurodiversity in academia; our article is therefore offered as one step of many necessary to unpick the complexities of the affective experience of disability and failure in the UK academy.

## The project we hoped would succeed

In 2023, Lizzie won a BA/Leverhulme Small Grant Award to explore how LGBTAQ+ young people used TikTok to access information and share knowledge about LGBTAQ+ identities, culture and health. Robin was recruited as Research Assistant and jointly we began work. This project, while carefully planned and costed, was time-limited by the funding awarded, and institutional workload demands constricted the space in which to conduct it. These difficulties were amplified further by the time and resource constraints our project partners were operating under. The project proposal was submitted with three project partners committed (a youth group – hereafter 'the YG', a national youth charity and an education academy trust with multiple sites) but six months later when the project was funded, contacts at the academy trust and at the national charity were no longer in

post. We therefore began the project with an unanticipated and unavoidable delay as we negotiated partnership with a new school (hereafter the School) and a new sixth form college (hereafter the Sixth Form), and established contact with a new worker at the national charity.

Armed with what we believed was a sufficient grasp on the core ways in which young people engage with TikTok, and a working understanding of the operation of the platform, we designed a two-part participatory workshop. Our project centred young people as experts in their digital worlds and invited them to educate, as adults who lack this knowledge, on the experience of being a young person online today. In the year-long period of our project, changes at the national charity meant that they did not host any suitable events for us to run our workshops at. Despite successfully scheduling dates and receiving consents for participants at the School, these workshops were repeatedly cancelled due to staff and student illness. In the three workshops we were able to run with the YG and Sixth Form, we engaged 25 young people aged between 13 and 21 over a period of four hours ($2 \times 1$-hour workshop, $1 \times 2$-hour workshop). Workshops were facilitated by Lizzie and Robin, with at least one member of staff from the partner organisation in the room at all times. All participants were recruited through partner organisations. Parents of participants under 16 provided written consent for their child to participate and under-16s signed an assent form before the workshop began. Participants over 16 reviewed and signed their own consent forms. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Southampton's ethics board (ERGO: 82704).

The workshop began with an ice-breaking activity about how often and for how long participants had used TikTok. We used the responses to open a roundtable discussion on the broader use and engagement participants had with TikTok. After 45 minutes, we provided refreshments and participants explored the props and costumes we provided. We asked participants to spend the remaining 45 minutes of the workshop making 'TikTok style' videos which expanded on, or responded to, some element of the preceding discussion. We provided lighting rings, mobile phone stands, data hotspots and two Android phones for participants to use to create videos using TikTok's embedded video editing tools. Once participants were satisfied with their videos, we asked them to upload them to our secure filestore via a file-drop page hosted on the university server. We retained these videos for six months to produce written summaries of their content, and then permanently deleted them. The first two-hour workshop at the YG resulted in just one submitted video. In our second workshop, split across two weeks in one-hour sessions (timed to fit in with the Sixth Form's timetabled teaching slots) we held the roundtable discussion in the first session and asked participants to make videos in the second. We received two videos from this session, although four were filmed.[2]

The overriding experience of conducting this project was one of breathless urgency frustrated by unforeseeable obstacles in staffing and capacity at project partners. This urgency derived from several political and policy contexts. Firstly, political and data-security debates in the UK and USA intensified during 2023 and 2024 with 'TikTok bans' being proposed in the USA and ultimately briefly enacted at the beginning of 2025 (McMahon, 2024; Walsh, 2025) and enforced on all governmental devices in the UK (Cabinet Office, 2023). In 2023, the Online Safety Act was passed in response to a range of high-profile campaigns, including from parents' groups who linked unregulated social

media content directly to teen suicides (see e.g. 'My 13-year-old daughter downloaded TikTok and six months later she was dead' [Patrick, 2023]). Concurrently, the UK Conservative government opened consultation on a draft education policy entitled 'Gender questioning children: Non-statutory guidance for schools and colleges in England' (Department for Education, 2023) which stated that 'there is no general duty to allow a child to "social transition"' (p. 3). Widely critiqued by LGBTAQ+ health and rights organisations as denying the agency of children and young people, it reflected the increasingly hostile UK social and educational context for LGBTAQ+ (especially trans and gender non-conforming) young people (Galop, 2023; Rainer, 2024). These debates and policy resolutions concerning (LGBTAQ+) children are ordered by an (adult) chrononormativity which intervenes in children and young people's lives and culture to reorientate imagined disruption into orderly maturation. As Kathryn Bond Stockton and Jack Halberstam have argued, child time is disruptive (Bond Stockton, 2009; Halberstam, 2005); the queer child defies chronobiopolitics with their irregular growth through 'lingerings, wayward paths, and fertile delays' (Bond Stockton, 2009, n.p.). Thus, the project was located at a complex site which required moving between multiple temporalities including the (manic) chrononormativity of educational and digital policy, UKHE and mismatched child and adult time.

These are not the ideal conditions in which to research creatively and compassionately, to find space to listen, or rest with uncertainty. Chased down by a fear of failure, rather than drawn forwards by curiosity and capacity to think and rethink, we moved headlong into the project, completing three workshops by the end of January 2024. At this time, our attempts to engage further project partners had proved unsuccessful and we examined the data we had collected to evaluate the degree to which we could address our core questions about the experience and knowledge of LGBTAQ+ youth on TikTok. In February 2024 as we began to reflect on what we could understand from the much smaller than anticipated dataset (three videos compared to the 30 we had expected, two complete workshops – split over three sessions – compared to the planned four), Lizzie was signed off sick from work because of worsening of symptoms of bipolar disorder and for the first time since the project funding was granted in March 2023, everything stopped. Time broke (Samuels, 2017, n.p.).

## This was a failure

We characterise this project as a failure because it *felt* like a failure. There were a number of circumstances beyond our control (redundancies, sickness, etc.) which impacted on our ability to schedule sufficient sessions to collect the range of data we identified as necessary. But the type of data we collected was also inadequate to address our research questions with the necessary confidence we wished to have when reporting on such a significant topic. A key reason for this was a fundamental misunderstanding on our part of how TikTok was used by young people. In workshops we learnt that young people's core engagement with TikTok was not through producing and sharing content on the platform but by responding to or watching content others have produced. Participants reported spending upwards of 30 hours a week using TikTok; overwhelmingly this time was spent scrolling down the endlessly renewing For You Page (FYP). Learning TikTok,

making sense of its lexicon and training its algorithm to deliver content you want to see is a slow process. It requires investment in the platform, development of trust in the capacity of the algorithm to deliver worthwhile content, and immersion in the language and structure of the network. We had anticipated coherent digital spaces existed for our participants on TikTok that they deliberately inhabited at different times (see e.g. Boffone & Jerasa, 2021; De Leyn et al., 2022; MacKinnon et al., 2021). We discovered that it was only by investing huge amounts of time, accepting the messiness and sometimes incoherence of the content the algorithm would deliver, and daily crafting of a feed, that TikTok came into view as a valuable but diffuse network which directs users to an engagement which is *slower and non-directive*. Our approach to methods design had attempted to match the *form* of TikTok rather than the *time* needed to learn TikTok. This failed to engage participants in the way we had intended and thus delivered limited data.

The project was motivated by a commitment to ensure that LGBTAQ+ youth voices were heard in debates about their needs and the supposed intrinsic harms of social media. As queer adults, we recognise the challenges facing LGBTAQ+ youth to find accepting, nurturing spaces and sought, through this project, to celebrate and enhance the provision of such spaces on TikTok and through youth services offered by project partners. Put simply: we wanted to be the adult allies we didn't see in our youth. Therefore, failing to connect with the young people because we lacked adequate knowledge of how TikTok is used, *hurt*. It hurt because we failed to live up to that biographically laden role and act to enhance the young people's rights or representation; and it hurt because we inadvertently became another adult in the young people's world who didn't understand them. For Robin this haunting by personal pasts was further deepened by unexpected recollections of their experiences as a sick young person. This was experienced as a failure as they felt they could, or should, have anticipated this and 'dealt with it' already. Our various personal and political hurts were deepened by a professional hurt. We sought academic success in the project; anticipating that our creative methods and our youth voice focus would deliver uniquely valuable insights, and tremendous value for money for our funder. Failing to deliver the planned and budgeted activities and failing to generate data which coherently addressed our research questions hurt our professional pride and, for Lizzie, undermined their confidence in the value of their subject expertise, research design skills, and ability to deliver a project on time. Academics are reassured of our abilities on all these points by the ongoing recognition we receive in published papers, conference presentations and invited talks. A project that cannot be packaged in this way threatens the very foundations of academic identity: the hurt of this project's failure was indicative of the loss of this professional assurance. The drive for this professional recognition was further motivated, as noted above, by internalised ableism and fears of proving oneself less valuable than abled peers. In this project's failure, there is scope to write a paper reflecting on the nature of participatory research, the complexity of in/out group knowledge, and what poor data can tell us. We could celebrate the strength of the method, noting that a hallmark of good participatory methods is allowing for the agency of participants to refuse to contribute or to contribute in unexpected ways (Holland et al., 2010, pp. 367, 373). We might also cite the temporal mismatch between the queer child time of our participants whose interest in educating us on their interactions with TikTok was limited, the slow time of TikTok's algorithmic learning, and the urgency and speed

of our (adult) research time. But this locates our failing in a single temporal mismatch and implicitly blames children and young people for their unruly time which rubbed against our schedules. These reframings and simple explanations sanitise the affective weight of feeling a project slip from your control, in tandem with a decline in your mental health, which causes distress as thinking and communicating become impossible. We refuse to reclaim this failure *because it hurt*.

This hurt is not instructive, but it is *descriptive* of a crip experience in the neoliberal academy where self and research are entwined; it is descriptive of structural challenges to research and engagement; and it is descriptive of wider challenges in education and the third sector. It is descriptive of the relationship between failure and time. The hurt exists in the past of conducting the project, the present of writing this article and the future of planning other research. It has also been a failure which, for Lizzie, has vanished in the mist of mania, has been erased in the narrative written in a promotion application, and was reasoned away when trying to plan the use of related methods in subsequent projects.

The chrononormativity of the neoliberal university creates conditions in which failure can seem inevitable for disabled staff and students (Chazan, 2023; Humphrey & Coleman-Fountain, 2024; Miller, 2020). But this is not solely about falling behind. Crip time has:

> . . . the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings. (Samuels, 2017, n.p.)

This definition is key, because keeping pace with chrononormativity requires moving swiftly and with urgency while crip time can include acceleration *as well as* catastrophic slowdowns and leaps across time. This is fundamentally at odds with being able to match (as with the children and young people we worked with) alternative temporalities – how can we slow down and meet them *and* accelerate to meet our work environments? How can we match child time and accurately communicate these tempos when advocating for children in the manic times of policy making? How can we ever succeed without meeting the manic chrononormativity of UKHE?

When living with bipolar, time is sometimes wildly accelerated; *this* crip time is manic which *is* compatible with the chrononormativity of the academy. Failure in this case comes *not* from failing to keep pace, but by keeping pace and this exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. Thus, failure is intertwined with time, not because going slow is failure and speeding up is success, or vice versa, but because there is a layered relationship between different chrononormativities, queered times and cripped times. The time of failure is, becomes, and always was, bipolar.

## Bipolar time

For many people with bipolar spectrum disorders (bipolar I, bipolar II, cyclothymia) variations in mood are non-linear: bipolar disorder can include large fluctuations of mood which negatively impact daily life but may or may not lead to mental health crisis

(Bonsall et al., 2012). Lizzie experiences bipolar disorder as everywhere and nowhere at once. They notice it when it resolves into acute distress which arrests the ordinary flow of life but simultaneously recognise that a claim of an 'ordinary flow' of life is inconsistent with the variability of mood from day to day or month to month. Advice on living with bipolar typically includes recommendations to normalise this variability through medication and lifestyle changes such as avoiding high stress, fast-paced or highly varied work environments (Miklowitz, 2019, p. 354; West, 2023). These self-management recommendations rely on routinising bipolar disorder. However, bipolar cannot – by its very nature – become familiar or everyday. Its extremes are too unpredictable, with cognitive distortions constantly threatening translocation to a different temporal or affective world. Mirroring the paradoxical recommendations to normalise one's mood and energy in a condition characterised by dysregulation of the same, pacing or self-management as a route to survive in neoliberal workplaces is doomed to fail because academic careers are characterised by the expectation of continual improvement, endless flexibility and infinite growth (Sheppard, 2020, p. 44). Thus, pacing (or attempting to avoid highly varied workplace demands) does not provide a route to renegotiate productivity discourses dependent on meeting chrononormativity 'but instead lays open the [disabled] person to internalised self-shaming and loathing due to their inability to be enough' (Sheppard, 2020, p. 44).

This failure is inevitable, not only for disabled academics, but for all people who cannot accelerate indefinitely to meet continually changing working conditions. This pattern of work is predictable in its continually increasing demands but is impossible to fully anticipate. Rather than a break from chrononormativity (as in many conceptualisations of crip time), bipolar produces disorderly, inconsistent and illogical misalignments with chrononormativity, which are disabling because they *partially* fulfil and then unexpectedly *collapse* the expectations of linear progression to success. Bipolar is routinely anticipated, experienced, scrutinised – *and* uncontainable, unpredictable and incomprehensible in the rhythms of day-to-day life. For example, while much of the urgency of the first half of the project was dictated by (chrononormative) project timelines, funding and objectively urgent socio-political contexts, it was also inflected by Lizzie's subjective experiences of anxiety-driven speedup which dovetailed with the end of a period of hypomania. This resulted in rapid progress through literature reviewing, production of research materials and recruitment consistent with many intensive research project timelines, but was driven in part by a frantic (lack of) pacing which further drained Lizzie's energy and resilience. The abrupt halt in the project (dictated by Lizzie's experience of depression, delusions, anxiety and exhaustion) was a period of abnormally slow time. For Lizzie, the project didn't just stop, but the time of this leave (one month) was subjectively longer than the rest of the project combined (11 months). This was not an experience of being 'left behind according to normative timescales' (Evans et al., 2024, p. 4) but of being ahead, behind, and then wholly outside of normative timescales. While the culture of 'overwork and hyper-productivity' (Evans et al., 2024, p. 4) undoubtedly pressures Lizzie's vulnerabilities, it does not determine their experience of bipolar disorder. Rest will not fix (hypo)mania, and *more* time is characteristic of the affective experience of depression.

The project continued without Lizzie during this month of sick leave as Robin worked on initial analysis and literature reviewing. Freeman (2010) describes chronic illness and disability as having 'hidden rhythms' wherein the boom and bust of energy and health appear cyclical, while the long-term nature of disability describes the endlessly renewing potential for another cycle. But it is a pattern without forward movement (Freeman, 2010, pp. 4–5). In this project the work undertaken by Robin while Lizzie was off sick generated another cycle, though it ultimately did not move the project forward because we lacked the data to complete this cycle. These different, simultaneous rhythms (of Lizzie's sick time and Robin's research time) illustrate the multiple times that run concurrently during a project, and which can serve to heighten the experience of being behind or out of time when sick. Humphrey and Coleman-Fountain (2024) write about allowing 'the development of the research to exist across multiple times and be experienced differently according to the different temporality requirements' of participants and researchers (p. 237). This flexible time begins to capture the necessity of creating space for engagement outside of a single temporality, but it does not fully address the feeling of failure which comes from being out of the flow of 'productive' times – especially while others remain in it on parallel tracks – nor does it capture the implications of an individual experiencing radically fluctuating temporalities. This is most explicit in the 'abnormal' time perception characteristic of bipolar which results in disturbances to 'intersubjective temporality' – i.e. the subjective perception of the pace of time and its alignment with the pace perceived by others (Northoff et al., 2018). For example, in mania and depression (at the 'poles'), people with bipolar can experience 'epiphanies or major transformations' which fit a narrative logic that (re)defines an entire life (Freeman, 2010, p. 5). These cognitive distortions result in the belief that successful outcomes – such as professional esteem or romantic fulfilment – can be realised in a single leap: skipping the cycles and processes which have at other times resulted in experiences of being behind, stuck or broken. These epiphanies fulfil the ideals associated with a chronobiopolitical life course and may be understood as a reaction to persistent feelings of failure stemming from frustrated or incomplete flows. A bipolar mood episode ending can mean a return to a disorientatingly slower temporality wherein previous perceptions of swift forward movement are revealed as inaccurate and former flows of life, such as intimate and working relationships, are discovered to have been destroyed (Miklowitz, 2019). Movement between these two states can be abrupt and unpredictable; resultingly time can appear shattered and include unexpected restarts which tie back to earlier progress in new and oftentimes illogical or delusional ways. This shattering and renewal is comparable to the peculiar 'rhythm' of academic workplaces which jump between intensive teaching periods, semester breaks and 'jarring restarts' of teaching timetables, research or meetings (Price, 2021, p. 261). Breaks in intersubjective temporality *and* the academic calendar do not produce renewal; they result in feelings of dislocation and confusion, while expectations that return from annual leave, sabbaticals or sick leave will be accompanied by 'more energy and readiness to reinvent' (Chazan, 2023, p. 8) can similarly leave academics feeling dizzyingly out of sync with the rhythms of the academy.

Conceptualisations of crip time rightly emphasise that there are many rhythms of disability which sit against a single normative abled rhythm of life and work (Sheppard, 2020, p. 40), though they often repeat the idea that these rhythms can be responded to, learned or anticipated (Tsai, 2022, p. 5; White, 2023, pp. 1266, 1271). We argue that a

'rhythm' which is unpredictable and disorderly, which breaks and restarts at a different tempo, cannot be called a rhythm at all. What we propose is a way to think about crip time as 'a time that is not one' (Bierdz, 2025, p. 558), but which avoids falling into the trap of proposing that many (crip) rhythms are evidence of a challenge to the centrality of a chrononormative rhythm. To actively imagine crip futures we must work with temporalities, not rhythms, to resist oppressive 'capitalist-ableist pressures' (Chazan, 2023, p. 2) and grapple with the central paradoxes: that in resistance to chrononormativity there is despair at failure and foreclosed futures (Todd, 2022, p. 779); that in rest there is expectation of accelerated productivity upon return (Chazan, 2023); and that while time may heal, it also harms (Price, 2021, p. 257).

Drawing on crip scholarship's convention of reclaiming diagnostic terms and renegotiating medicalised knowledge through the lens of lived experience, we choose to redeploy 'bipolar' in the service of a critical model of time. What we term *bipolar time* names the non-rhythmic, cacophonous chaos of times which are constantly in a state of variation and collapse within an individual, as well as between individuals and groups. Rather than stepping back to assume a panoptic view which reveals a normative pattern (or torturously extended rhythm) of time, bipolar time sits firmly at the subjective, affective level where times and failure are experienced. In the moment of meeting it, failure cannot be contextualised in a lifetime or a career, it is immediate and specific. Similarly, in the moment of experiencing mania, it is absolute and complete. Both states exist alongside of and in collision with others whose experiences are whole and distinct: there is no single rhythm which describes the experience of any group, person or institution, but many competing temporalities demanding different paces, tempos and constant adjustments which can never be entirely successful within the constantly contracting space in which to get well, be ill, or produce knowledge.

Bipolar disorder is not experienced by everyone. At the level of our project team alone, Lizzie lives with bipolar disorder and Robin does not. But we contend that bipolar *time* may be, to some extent, experienced by everyone. Giving name to this experience offers space for an affective examination of the experience of fluctuating, conflicting and often damaging temporalities which seem to be characteristic of UKHE and offers the opportunity for a critical examination of our unequal experience of time.

Following Samuels (2017) 'six ways of looking at crip time', we propose four ways of characterising bipolar time:

> *Bipolar time is affective and contextual.* Embodied experiences inflect and are imbued by our perceptions of time, and this dynamic symbiotic process varies across individuals, and within individuals, as they relate to the same event. For Lizzie, the speedups and slowdowns associated with their fluctuating mood inflected everyday work on the research project with panic, dread, exhilaration and triumph. Robin felt excitement before each workshop, in anticipation of new insights and the opportunity to hone their skills as a researcher. Both authors experienced mounting anxiety related to the looming changes to educational and healthcare policies that would negatively impact trans people in the UK and abroad – issues that intertwined with both this research project, and our communities and life outside of academia. The intertwining

of these affective experiences and temporalities could not be predicted, crossed over themselves, and were shaped by factors in and outside of the project's boundaries.

*Bipolar time is non-rhythmic, non-linear and unpredictable*, including both accelerations and slowdowns. While our project seemed to accelerate in the early months as we secured project partners, ethics approval and participant consents, our misapprehension about the nature of the use of TikTok by young people meant our pace was simultaneously exceptionally slow at moving towards understanding. The unpredictable slowdowns caused by illness and lost partners broke the flow of the project time, and we broke tempo with each other, as Robin continued to work while Lizzie was ill. Our research time was also out of pace with how slowly our participants moved through their digital worlds. These overlapping breaks in 'productive' times did not always resolve or lead to renewal, which informed our sense of failure.

*Bipolar time has disorderly misalignments with chrononormativity.* Speedups which conformed to the manic chrononormativity of UKHE looked like ideal productivity: our historic success in meeting these relentless speeds were offered as evidence of the deliverability of the project but contribute to greater pressures to deliver ever more complex projects in accelerating contexts. Planned breaks in UKHE terms and expectations academics will be able to slow down or rest in these times are at odds with the competing times of research, which may accelerate according to participant availability or the pace of work of researchers. The moments of collapse or slowdown that peppered the project were unpredictable, un-narratable divergences from chrononormativity's supposed linearity, which were felt as personal failures.

*Bipolar time can be experienced by everyone*, but its implications and consequences are not equal. Stress (such as that associated with pressures to continually deliver improved education, pastoral support or research) is a widely identified trigger for worsening of bipolar disorder. The pressures surrounding this project, and the manic time of UKHE, incentivised constant acceleration. Matching this speed is celebrated despite potential negative impacts upon research participants and their communities, and the damage it has upon the health of researchers. Individual researchers are differently pressured by these manic times, as vulnerabilities are variably amplified and compounded for exploitation by a system that only recognises success through a narrow, linear process. Misalignments to chrononormativity make disabled individuals more acutely affected by the threat and felt sense of failure stemming from resisting, refusing or falling behind. This affective dimension of failure is familiar for some, not (solely) because of differences in achievement, but because of discourses that construct certain minds, bodies and ways of being as wrong.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we have argued for a rethinking of failure in research, moving beyond linear narratives of progress and productive setbacks. By examining the experience of a (failed) research project through the lens of cripped temporalities, and by introducing the

concept of 'bipolar time', we have highlighted how the manic chrononormativity of the academy, with its relentless demands for speed and productivity, connects and conflicts with the fluctuating and unpredictable realities of (disabled) academics' lives. In this article we have focused primarily on bipolar academics and the temporal mismatch which exists for this group with our environment; but all groups – queer children and young people, adult researchers, teachers, youth workers – have incompatible times and different grasps on what success or failure constitutes. We suggest this is a productive problem for future work to explore, considering how certain temporalities may be (in) compatible and how this informs what types of projects or people can be successful, and who is likely to fail. Failure and time are *not one*: they emerge through the interplay of many temporalities and measures of success.

We all fluctuate through different temporalities. Disability may heighten these fluctuations from normative time: but chrononormativity is not normal. UKHE time is manic, and it continues to accelerate until we break; some of us break differently. In those breaks – between our time and yours, between UKHE time and us, between expectation and outcome – we experience the pain of failure. By centring the affective experience of failure, we have argued that failure is not (always) instructive or redeemable but deeply felt and structurally embedded. This necessitates a shift away from (only) celebrating research projects which can survive the manic chrononormativity of UKHE and towards an embrace of the complex and varied temporalities that researchers inhabit which do not always produce answers or lead to completed projects. This is not about publishing articles from projects which produced no useful data, routinely listing failures, or even allowing indefinite extensions for project funding (although all of these are valuable moves towards a more flexible and accommodating research environment). It is about a radical acceptance of failure as something unavoidable, something which will attach more readily and more frequently to minoritised and problematised groups and individuals, and – given that it hurts – something for which we need to routinely provide care to one another, rather than attempting to tidy it away or isolate those experiencing it.

To begin to achieve that, we have described 'bipolar time'. As an enhanced framing of crip time, bipolar time addresses the challenge of describing non-chrononormativity without reproducing rhythm as the organising principle of these other or broken times. Bipolar time offers a model by which we can name the non-rhythmic temporalities which do not follow expected lines and emerge as cacophonous breaks with chrononormativity. These breaks are not new rhythms, or slower rhythms; they may at times conform to the rhythm of chrononormativity, but they are out of place, unexpected, excessive or stuck. Failure exists in this cacophonous, non-rhythmic place; it is everywhere and nowhere, experienced individually but structurally situated – imposed on disabled people by an abled society, constructed through impossible pacing in UKHE. These structural factors have near endless intersections with race, class, gender, sexuality and more which make failure stickier for some than others. Some of us more readily find we cannot keep pace with chrononormativity and discover we cannot tidy our chaotic, non-rhythmic temporalities back into the complex pacing of our work environments. Thus, we cannot equally choose (or reclaim) failure as a position of challenge: there is no rhythm to eke out from it or pattern to follow to reclaim the time needed for success.

Bipolar time is a metaphor for the complexities of times as we variously experience them, and as it intersects with other times and demands. It provides a way to index the components of time, of illness, of accelerating contexts, which construct the experience of failure. Bipolar time describes the non-rhythmic space where failure is everywhere and nowhere, personal-affective, contextual and structural. It is not just a metaphor for personal struggle; we offer it as a *critical tool* to analyse how times move – and how (or whether) we move against/with time – in ways which reinforce inequalities. Bipolar time offers a mechanism to explore how failure is attached to certain bodies and why 'reasonable adjustments' or accommodations for disability do not preclude the painful affective experience of delivering work on time, slowly, or not at all. We also suggest it offers a frame by which we can challenge hyper-productivity as a mark of success and instead open discussions about vulnerabilities and the normalisation of exploitation. Finally, we suggest bipolar time provides the language necessary to articulate why talking about failure in research as a brief roadblock can feel inaccurate; we must be able to speak about failure without folding it back into a neat part of the narrative of success and without tidying away the hurt that accompanies it.

We hope bipolar time also allows us to let failure rest. Sometimes, our research doesn't feel good, and sometimes we are ill. That's ok.

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## Notes

1.  Chrononormativity describes the 'hidden rhythms' and forms of temporal experience that 'seem natural to those whom they privilege' (Freeman, 2010, p. 3). This is expressed in chronobiopolitics which synchronises individual bodies within cyclical time, stabilising 'its forward movement, promising renewal rather than rupture', and is thus symbiotic with linear time (Freeman, 2010, pp. 4–5).

2.  Participants were free to use their own phones to film and edit these videos before uploading them to our filestore. At the Sixth Form two groups opted not to upload their videos, although they were happy for us to watch as they were filmed. We heard from participants they were anxious their jokes or tone would be misunderstood, or we would judge the videos as incorrect responses to the prompt. This fear of judgement (or failure) is likely part of why they opted not to submit their videos.

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