



# Exposing the feeling of “not good enough”: Working with the failure conversations map

by Jonaki Arora



Jonaki Arora has been working with young people in India for over 16 years. She has a background in developmental psychology and holds a Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work. Jonaki works in private practice with individuals, families and in school settings, walking alongside young people as they challenge the labels and dominant stories placed upon them. She teaches narrative therapy through a course run by Children First in collaboration with Dulwich Centre, and believes firmly that therapy is political.  
jonakiarora@gmail.com

## Abstract

This paper addresses the phenomenon of personal failure and its relationship with modern power. It describes Michael White’s failure conversations map and the underlying narrative practices that support it. It demonstrates the usefulness of the failure conversations map in subverting modern power and generating preferred identity conclusions through conversations with a young woman in India. The paper also brings attention to the politics of therapy. Through this, I hope to not only address people’s sense of failure but to also use therapy as a site for local social activism.

**Key words:** *personal failure; failure conversations map; modern power; inadequacy; imposter; India; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

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Perhaps we have all felt inadequate at some time. But despite being ubiquitous, experiences of personal failure are not evenly distributed. A sense of personal failure is rooted in comparison with restrictive societal norms. Intersectional feminism highlights how these norms – steeped in privilege and power – affect people differently based on race, caste, gender, sexuality and other identities, compounding pressures for those at the intersections of marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1991). Neoliberal ideologies further embed this by promoting self-actualisation, self-realisation and individual responsibility, shifting blame for systemic barriers on to individuals (Foucault, 2000). Attributing life struggles to personal failings conceals the intersecting forces of oppression that shape access to opportunities and success (Mark Hayward, personal comment, 2019).

In India's collectivistic society, pressure to conform to moral and normative codes is particularly strong for marginalised communities and individuals. India's longstanding history of colonisation, its caste system and religious politics all contribute to maintaining a steep economic divide and class-based discrimination. Gender-based oppression intersects with this, creating pockets of harsh suffering.

In my work in New Delhi, I meet many young people who are constantly evaluating their worth, treating life like a video game in which one might get points by following certain instructions or carrying out certain tasks, and incur losses if they fail certain briefs. The game never ends; it just continues to level up. It invites people to constantly practice perfecting or proving themselves, whether in academic performance, looks, popularity, relationships or many of these at once. A pervasive sense of inadequacy or the feeling of "I'm not good enough" often disguises itself under labels of depression, anxiety or even "personality disorder", with grave consequences like isolation and suicidal thoughts (Angela, Brett, & Jess, 2004).

This paper advocates for the use of the failure conversations map (White, 2002; see also Denborough, 2014, pp. 147–176; Hutton, 2008) and sets out the narrative principles and

practices that it embeds. I discuss the map in the context of my work with a young woman and her experiences of "not good enough". But first, let's look closely at the relationship between modern power and personal failure.

### *Modern power is directly proportional to personal failure*

Modern power and its omnipresence have increased people's sense of inadequacy (White, 2002). Modern power acts through normalising judgements. Based on Foucault's (1980, 1997) theories of power, discourse, social control and ethical subjectivity, White (2002) elaborated on the formation of norms and how they are granted "truth" status. We are led to believe that abiding by such truths is the point of life. Local bodies of culture dispense these truths and contribute to the formation of normalising judgements. Our inevitable failure to meet these limiting and exclusionary norms can lead to a sense of inadequacy and to negative identity conclusions.

White (2002) proposed that we recognise agency in this sense of failure and see it instead as an act of refusal of modern power. This can help us to shake the truth status of certain discourses and to set aside the pursuit of adequacy.

I am drawn to explore what makes such refusal possible: how we might bring to light ways of living that do not reproduce the norms of contemporary culture, and how we might endeavour to remanufacture identity in ways that are not wedded to conforming with the "truth". White (2002) proposed a failure conversations map to navigate such conversations. This map draws on the influential work of Foucault (1980, 1997, 2000), who delineated categories of pursuit of identity. Using these categories to build stories about refusal to conform to modern power can be helpful in the creation of alternative and preferred identity conclusions.

The failure conversations map (White, 2002, pp. 58–60) is presented in eight stages or categories of inquiry as shown in the table below.

Table 1. The failure conversations map

Stage	Description	Background	Questions
<b>Failure in relation to ...</b>	<p>Inquiry to reveal the norms, standards and expectations against which we measure our failure.</p> <p>What are we comparing ourselves with when we feel we have failed?</p>	<p>Often, we take these “truths” and standards for granted, which makes them invisible to us. This invisibility affords them their power.</p> <p>It is important to expose these norms so they can be available for examining.</p>	<p>What is this sense of failure in relation to?</p> <p>What measures have you used to reach these conclusions about yourself?</p> <p>What standards are you thinking about when you think you’re not measuring up?</p>
<b>Response to failure</b>	<p>Investigation of actions and efforts we have made to measure up.</p> <p>What have we done in pursuit of adequacy?</p>	<p>These norms have us go through excruciatingly effortful steps to comply with them.</p> <p>Businesses have been set to teach people how to ace these steps.</p> <p>These are the ways all of us participate in perpetuating social control through modern power.</p> <p>It’s important to lay bare these efforts and practices. This also helps us to take a position.</p>	<p>What does this standard have you do or not do to meet it?</p> <p>How have you tried to measure up?</p>
<b>Unique outcomes</b>	<p>Inquiry about expressions, actions and responses that don’t fit with expectations.</p> <p>How might we be refusing to completely comply with these norms?</p>	<p>These expressions and actions are important to identify as they indicate places we might continue to explore.</p> <p>Moments of noncompliance point to a failure of modern power itself. Making these moments visible allows us to see that modern power is not all pervasive and is susceptible to resistance.</p>	<p>What do you do that might be different from your efforts to measure up?</p> <p>Have there been moments of stepping back from some of these efforts to comply?</p>
<b>Foundations of action</b>	<p>Identifying actions that have formed a platform for refusal.</p>	<p>Alternate identity conclusions lie in the shadow of failure. Uncovering the foundation of actions is an entry point to bringing this shadow to light. This is where questions about what is absent but implicit will be useful.</p>	<p>How have you managed to step back from your efforts to comply?</p>

Stage	Description	Background	Questions
<b>Ethical substance</b>	<p>Exploration of the values that are embodied in the steps taken to resist compliance with norms.</p> <p>Identifying primary or “bottom-line” considerations that inform how we live our lives.</p>	This helps a person recognise that their actions have not come out of a vacuum, that they are deeply rooted in a personal value system. From here, we traverse into the landscape of identity.	<p>What is it that comes through as important here?</p> <p>What guides these actions of yours?</p>
<b>Bodies of values and principles</b>	Inquiry about what guides us in applying our most treasured values and bottom-line considerations.	What we hold to be important has a history: it comes from our culture, context and belief systems, and in relationship with people we love and respect. Considering shared value systems can link stories together.	<p>What guides you in your expression of these values?</p> <p>How did these ideas come to be important for you?</p> <p>Who introduced you to these ideas?</p>
<b>Self- and relationship-forming activities</b>	Investigating the life-shaping activities we engage in to pursue an ethical way of being: how we treat ourselves and others.	As we become more attuned to what guides us, we reach an arena of possibilities. We can now think about how we might make this more apparent in our life.	<p>How do you maintain your connection with this value?</p> <p>What do you do in your everyday life that keeps this alive?</p>
<b>Desired goals</b>	Exploration of our goals in life: what we would like to achieve through our efforts to live by our ethics.	Alternate identity conclusions become available to us.	<p>What does this say about you?</p> <p>What does this tell us about the kind of life you want to live?</p>

I have found that the failure conversations map relies heavily on deconstructing conversations that situate problems in their social contexts, the identification of unique outcomes, inquiries about the absent but implicit, and exploration of the landscape of identity (White, 2007). I'd like to share a story of practice and my learnings from it to elaborate on these practices.

### *Radical failure*

I met a spirited 21-year-old woman named Sunita who was reflective and not afraid of questions and confrontations. Sunita had grown up in orphanages and institutions. When she turned 18, she had to move out and make her own way. She worked with a theatre group and as a tour guide, but when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived,

she lost her job and became socially isolated. Around this time, Sunita became interested in exploring sex with herself and others.

She became an avid user of dating apps. When some of her peers and previous guardians found out about this, they were surprised and called Sunita *nalayak* (good for nothing), *badtameez* (mannerless), and *awara* (rogue/characterless). Some of her friends laughed and said, “You do not belong to our culture”. Her previous guardians told some of her friends not to hang out with her anymore as they deemed her not to be good company. Over time, this led Sunita to thoughts that “maybe something is wrong with me and I can’t control myself” and “I need to fix myself”. She reached out to her guardians who took her to a psychiatrist. She was told she was a sex addict and was put on medication. She was advised to practice abstinence and was told that she would cause harm to her body if she continued to have “a lot of sex”. She was also advised to undertake therapy to be rid of thoughts about sex. That’s how she reached me.

From our initial conversation, I held on to the key narrative principle of ensuring we located the problem in its social context rather than within the person. Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese and Cheryl White (2007) emphasised that gender and culture cannot be separated. Externalising conversations and experience-near language are useful to locate a problem outside of the person, making it possible to attend to intersectional considerations, such as class, caste, culture, gender, ability and sexuality. Then it is also possible to examine how broader relations of power have contributed to the creation of the problem (Russel & Carey, 2003).

I used the following questions with Sunita to attend to these considerations:

- How and when did you come to see your desire to engage in sex as a problem?
- Who determined that this is sex addiction?
- What parameters were used to come to this decision?
- How did these parameters come to be? Would they be the same for men and women?

- Would the parameters be different in different cultures? Or for someone from another class or caste?

These questions helped us to uncover gender and class politics in these discourses. Sunita pointed out that “a man would not have been slut shamed if he was using Tinder and a woman from a different class might not be called a slut so easily”. This helped her feel less frustrated with herself.

After a few months in therapy, in a surprising turn of events, Sunita decided to take up a job as a sex worker. At first, I saw this as meaning our therapy had failed. Sunita’s guardians had been encouraging her to see a different therapist because she had continued to have sex and declined to practice abstinence. They saw this as meaning the therapy wasn’t working. When Sunita shared her decision to take up sex work, I was infected with a strong bout of self-doubt. I used conversations about “safety” to have her rethink this decision, taking a very “centred and influential” position. I believe this was modern power trying to ensure I took the “right steps” as a therapist. Fortunately, I had the principles of the failure conversations map to fall back on along with Sunita’s strong voice.

I had many questions and worries about my work with Sunita. Although Sunita was clear she had chosen this work to gain access to more and good sex, I didn’t want to ignore the social meanings and impacts of sex work in our culture. I was concerned about viewing women’s engagement in sex work as purely a matter of choice, as this risked overlooking exploitation and diverting accountability away from the structural conditions produced by marginalisation and poverty. This concern was shaped by a dominant single story of sex work in India, where sex trafficking is prevalent and sex work is illegal. My worries had me interested in unpacking what had led to Sunita’s choice in light of her context and how it influenced her decision. Sunita saw this work as a choice that brought her a sense of agency. She saw sex work as conveying her ownership of her own body and openly told everyone around her about her work. She said this kind of ownership

and acceptance helped her exercise consent in her work. At her workplace, Sunita resisted various norms expected of sex workers, such as dressing a certain way. This often got her into trouble, but she persisted and refused to comply.

Questions about Sunita’s position on her decision were helpful. I asked about:

- the effects of this decision on her and her life
- whether this was a positive development or a negative development in her life.

These conversations made it possible for me to establish this decision as a (radically)

unique outcome connected to her efforts to be rid of normative ideas about sex.

The last few categories of inquiry in the failure conversations map attend to building a landscape of identity. These questions focus on intentions, values, hopes, beliefs and commitments associated with actions that convey a refusal to reproduce or comply with certain norms. Understanding the meaning, history and relevance of such actions in a person’s life can provide support for similar actions. My landscape of identity enquiries and Sunita’s responses are shown in the following table.

Table 2. Landscape of identity inquiries

Stage of the failure conversations map	My questions	Sunita’s responses
<b>Foundations of action</b>	What led you to this decision to take up sex work? How were you able to “not care” about being a <i>layak ladki</i> [worthy woman]?	I enjoy sex and want good sex, so was curious to try it to seek more pleasure and experience of sex. Also, I have to earn money. Besides, if a man had posted such pictures on Instagram, no-one would slut shame him, but they would to me. If we stay quiet, they’ll continue to bully us. So this is my answer and I feel no shame.
<b>Ethical substance</b>	What comes through as more important for you here?	Sex. It’s important for me and it’s my body so my rules. No-one can tell me what to wear or what to do. Self-respect is also important to me. It’s important to take a stand.
	What guides you to go forward in this direction?	I don’t want other girls to feel shame or not be able to fight. If I do it, then someone else may do it too. Concern for others and myself keeps me going.
<b>Bodies of values and principles</b>	When did this become important for you? How did you come to care about it so much?	Even when I was younger, the guardians couldn’t get me to change my clothes even if they beat me. I’d never show them my tears either. It takes guts, acceptance, confidence. I am standing up for girls.
<b>Self- and relationship-forming activities</b>	How are you able to prioritise this in your day?	Telling everyone about what I do honestly. And connecting with other girls who work at the spa – I talk to them about sex, about saying no. Wearing what I want to wear, telling men to look away. Registering my objections on Instagram, at the workplace, with men.

Stage of the failure conversations map	My questions	Sunita's responses
<b>Desired goals</b>	What does this say about you and your hopes? What might be made possible if you continue in this direction?	I want to share my story and ideas about sex so girls don't shy away from talking about sex, periods, masturbation, pregnancy and their bodies. <i>Mujhe sharm nahi aati ab</i> [I am not ashamed anymore] so my story should be used for that.

Sunita's meaning-making process helped me see how her decision to engage in sex work was imbued with agency. She had let go of the shame that had brought her in for therapy. Locating her actions as resistance to normative judgements helped us examine ideas of consent, the rights of sex workers and the effects of patriarchy. These conversations helped Sunita reconnect with her values and beliefs about how she would like to live her life.

One day, Sunita described an evening with her friends where she had discussed and debated ideas around sex. She said, "*Mujhe bada mazza aaya parliament bithane mein*" [I had fun debating this!]. This was a different experience than when she had felt ashamed about thinking about sex all the time! It seemed we were moving towards a preferred territory of agency. In addition, this made it possible for her to have confident conversations with other sex workers encouraging them to demand consent and practice safety.

Sunita also thought about writing a book about her experiences as a sex worker to help young women in India normalise talking about sex and their bodies. She wanted to help young women explore and understand more about female pleasure. Sharp (2024) and Serendipity (2024) have both demonstrated the power of documentation and insider knowledge in fostering solidarity and elevating stories of agency for sex workers.

Sunita felt she no longer needed therapy to address her "sex addiction". She had been nudged into therapy by others who thought her ways of living were problematic, and now that she had connected with how she wanted to

live her life, she was making her own decision about therapy. I respected this act of agency. We tapered our meetings slowly, and at present, we meet once every few months to check in. During one such check in, Sunita shared that she had started attending church again, and that letting go of shame had made this easier. She wanted to work on rekindling her faith. This helped her reconnect with some of her peers and previous guardians. She continues to work as a sex worker and is trying to save money to travel to the city of her birth.

### Deconstructing conversations

When people come into the therapy room, they are often weighed down by negative conclusions either about themselves or their lives or both. Modern power is almost always complicit in such conclusions, but it often remains invisible to the person (White, 1991). It can impersonate the person's voice to the extent that the person finds it difficult to separate the voice of modern power from their own voice. Its omnipresence makes it more difficult to untangle its influence from a person's life. It is important that we make efforts to bring attention to the operations and effects of modern power on a person's sense of self and their life. A compelling way to do so is through deconstructing conversations that question taken-for-granted practices.

Tracing the presence and influence of normative judgements on a person's life can make such judgements available for examination. This enables the person to take a position on the judgement and decide on the kind of relationship they'd like

to have with it. Through this, more choices can become available to the person about how they wish to live their life, as they did for Sunita when we deconstructed the label of “sex addict”.

Unique outcomes can widen conversations about failure. Conversations about personal failure can be flipped over to see failure of modern power. A unique outcome is essentially modern power not able to do its job! Since the operations of powers are pervasive to the extent that it's next to impossible for people to figure out when they are under surveillance and when they're not, they are goaded to perpetually evaluate themselves (White, 1991). This can make modern power seem invincible. If we use these conversations in therapy to consider acts of resistance as failures of modern power then we can point out cracks in its operations. Realising the fallibility of modern power is important to conversations about agency and maintaining the will to stand up to its ruses.

### *The absent but implicit*

Positioning experiences of failure as acts of refusal of modern power is a practice of identifying what is absent but implicit in an experience (Danilopoulos, 2011). To do this, we might ask questions like, “What is it that you hold important, which is so strong that the dominant discourse failed in front of it?” The question states the failure of dominant discourse and at the same time implies the triumph of a personal value. The absent but implicit is key in heralding alternative meaning-making from the shadows of failure. Serendipity (2024) used questions about the absent but implicit with sex workers to acknowledge their struggles. She asked: “What do you give value to, that you're refusing to abandon, that sustains you in this work? What matters to you?” This made me think of the failure conversations map. The question stands to be useful in eliciting responses about foundations of action leading us to conversations about ethical substance.

To elicit a personal value system becomes a political act in the therapy room because now power can be subverted. We can see how in the

face of certain personal values and knowledges modern power can be vulnerable. This forms a pathway to the landscape of identity.

### *Irony of preferred shoulds*

Dominant discourses set out directives for people to follow in their pursuit of “normality”. These directives involve many shoulds, musts and have-tos. Karen Horney (1950) called these pressures a “tyranny of should”. Similar to this, we stand to meet the “irony of preferred shoulds” in the landscape of identity. These are discourses disguised as apparently positive ideas. These preferred shoulds can be expressed in the form of values: a person may want to align their actions with such a should, making it desirable and meaningful. Since the ways of power are insidious, preferred shoulds can encourage a person's subjugation to their directions. A person might not see this as an effect of power, but rather as something like fulfilment (White, 1991).

Sunita initially felt aligned with the idea that she should not have so many thoughts about sex, should not want so much sex, and should not masturbate. Compliance with these shoulds had been presented as the answer to her problems and she wanted to be “cured”. However, she moved away from these assumptions soon after we began reflecting on them.

In my work, I've noticed that when identifying what is it they give value to, young people often name things like “being productive”, “staying healthy”, or “being my authentic self”. If we leave the origins and effects of these preferred values unexamined, we can unwittingly perpetuate dominant discourses. White (2002) pointed out that narrative therapy does not promote an “anything goes” approach, but rather an approach in which “nothing goes” unexamined.

### *Navigating power and privilege*

I want to acknowledge my struggle with Sunita's decision to end therapy. I was visited

by normative judgements encouraging me to measure “success”. Was this a “success story” suitable to share in a journal article? This led me to reflect on dominant discourses about what therapy is for: What’s the role of a therapist? What makes for a successful story? Does closure of therapy require a success story? Who decides that? Again, the failure conversations map and reflection on therapists’ ethical substance helped me make sense and find the path ahead.

I am a therapist who studied psychology, a discipline that tries very hard to be seen as science and in that attempt has fashioned many tools to classify people and their problems. Psychologists are afforded an expert position in the therapy room. Therapy is considered a treatment or cure for people and their problems. This creates politics and power in the therapy room. If we do not take care to understand and respond to the effects of this context then we can intentionally or unintentionally become conduits of modern power. The process of therapy can recruit people into recreating norms of life: I might have used therapy to “help” Sunita leave sex work and make efforts to be a “good girl”.

When we become a channel providing modern power with greater access to people, then aren’t we participating in forms of social control? Aren’t we then multiplying experiences of failure for people rather than addressing their sense of inadequacy? Whom does therapy really serve then? I don’t think it serves the people who consult us, and I definitely don’t think it serves therapists either. We can get caught up with measuring the success and worth of therapy and therapists, forming a vicious cycle of modern power’s flow. Fareez’s (2019) ideas reminded me that we can challenge and deviate from the technologies of modern power that push us to adhere to norms, not just with the people who consult with us but also with ourselves. Supervision, readings, reflections and engaging with ideas of accountability become important. These ideas also helped me understand and decide on my role as a therapist in the therapy room. I agree with the following understanding:

Ethical substance for narrative therapists is to work on power ... What this seems to call the narrative therapist to do is to acknowledge the power, the distribution of privilege, and the marginalising potential of therapy, and consider, as an ethical priority, how relations of power may be subverted and the effects reduced. (Haugaard, 2016, p. 9)

I am drawn towards exploring ideas and practices that resist the dominant discourses that marginalise and oppress people. Acknowledging our privilege or social location in the therapy can be a first step towards this.

Sunita and I are both cisgender heterosexual women and we grew up in the same city in India. While this could help me understand some of the ways in which the culture around us might have affected her and her problem, my social location was completely different from hers, so I tried not to assume anything and to focus instead on redressing power relations. I have many privileges. I am an upper caste, Hindu (dominant religion in India), older, able-bodied, married woman who has a house, an education, a job, a family. I have always had access to financial stability, health care and (relative) safety. Sunita, on the other hand, belonged to a lower socioeconomic class and converted to Christianity in her childhood (a religion of minority in India). She had lived in charity institutions all her life, so access to education, knowledge, health care, safety and personal space were limited. Circumstances of her birth and context of orphanhood also placed her at a social disadvantage in our culture. Her marginalised social location led to poverty, which in turn made her more vulnerable to exploitation and hardship. It was important to ensure I didn’t render invisible the broader contexts of Sunita’s experiences. Ensuring we discussed how the context might have shaped the problem and her resistance to it remained important throughout. Some other practices that guided me to stay on this path were:

- staying tentative and curious instead of taking an “I know what you mean” position
- enquiring about the usefulness of our conversations
- maintaining respect and transparency by gaining consent to document and then share this story
- decentring my knowledges despite overlaps in experience
- holding on to Sunita’s knowledge and bringing in other sources of information so my knowledge wasn’t the only “truth” in our conversations
- using Sunita’s preferred name rather than her given name
- considering language — not centring English yet not dismissing it completely because Sunita felt a certain pride in her skills with English
- not using labels or diagnoses to make meaning of Sunita’s experiences.

Some of these practices were significant in contributing to Sunita’s growing sense of agency and movement towards a preferred narrative.

Drawing on Foucault’s work, White (2002) emphasised that

If the operations of modern power are derived through the uptake of self and relationship practices that are first developed at the local level of culture, and if they principally operate at these levels — in clinics, schools, families, and so on — then there is the ever present potential for people to contribute to social change through the local development and sponsorship of self-and relationship-forming practices that do not directly reproduce the constructed norms of contemporary culture. (White, 2002, pp. 37–38)

To this end, we can cultivate practices that tend to resist normative judgements, and encourage people’s ownership of their own stories.

Children First, India, the organisation I worked with for many years, has continuously challenged ideas about how mental health services should be run by not subscribing to many common and dominant discourses. These acts of resistance highlight how the professional is also political. “As therapists we can be a bridge between the social justice work being done in the community and our therapy rooms” (Sen, 2021, p. 61).

## Conclusion

Understanding the mechanics of power and its relationship with a sense of personal failure has helped me find meaningful ways to respond to expressions of “not good enough”. Locating the problem outside of the person and making visible the contribution of broader contexts and relations of power in the experience of personal failure have been significant.

The failure conversations map involves the use of deconstruction, unique outcomes, absent-but-implicit, and landscape of identity conversations. It was influential in generating agency and preferred identity conclusions with Sunita.

I hope further use of this map in therapeutic conversations will shift blame from individuals to social contexts and will encourage people to shed shame. This is likely to reduce isolation and lead to both personal and collective actions that will continue to debunk feelings of “not good enough”, and stand in the way of modern power’s mechanics, turning therapy into a site for social activism. The following words by Michael White bring me a lot of hope and joy at the prospect of working with a sense of personal failure:

This is a power that is everywhere. However, this is not a reason to despair. If modern power is everywhere to be perceived ... then there are endless opportunities for us to develop an account of these operations, and to subvert them. (White, 2011, p. 26)

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