

Fear of Failure, Self-Handicapping, and Negative Emotions in Response to Failure

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Abstract

Research suggests that students who fear failure are likely to utilize cognitive strategies such as self-handicapping that serve to perpetuate failure. Such devastating motivational dispositions clearly limit academic success. The present study examined negative emotional responses to scenarios involving academic failure among a sample of university students ($N = 48$).

Additionally, among those high in fear of failure, we examined differences in emotional responses involving the self-conscious negative emotions of shame and embarrassment to scenarios involving failure with and without self-handicapping. With respect to the first aim, participants high in fear of failure (FF) reported stronger negative emotional responses to failure than those low in FF. Additionally, among those high in FF, self-conscious negative emotions were less intense in the presence of self-handicapping relative to failure without prior self-handicapping. Future motivational research will need to sort out the complex relationships between fear of failure, self-handicapping, and negative emotions. (Contains 2 tables)

Keywords: fear of failure, self-handicapping, negative emotions, and failure

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Fear of failure is a motivational disposition in which an individual experiences shame upon failure and overgeneralizes failure (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). Moreover, individuals who fear failure tend to underutilize cognitive strategies (e.g., metacognitive strategies; Bartels & Magun-Jackson, 2009) that would enhance academic performance and overutilize cognitive strategies (e.g., self-handicapping; Elliot & Church, 2003) that increase the odds of failure. While shame is prominent in FF, negative emotional responses to failure in general may be more intense among those high in the motive. In a recent study by Sagar and Stoeber (2009), participants were presented with scenarios in which they were to imagine they had failed at an athletic competition and report how they felt in response to failure. Results revealed positive correlations between FF and negative emotions (e.g., embarrassed, depressed, and disappointed) in response to failure scenarios.

Self-handicapping involves the use of a self-imposed obstacle prior to performance (e.g., an exam), the purpose of which is to protect self-esteem in the event of failure (Elliot & Church, 2003). That is, the use of a self-imposed obstacle such as procrastination, though increasing the possibility of failure, allows the individual to avoid attributing failure to a lack of ability, thus protecting self-esteem. In shielding self-esteem one may also be defending oneself from the emotional consequences of failure. In the absence of self-handicapping, failure may be more consequential for those low in self-esteem, engender stronger self-focused negative emotions (e.g., shame) relative to those with high self-esteem (Brown & Dutton, 1995). As noted, like low self-esteem, FF is associated with a heightened sensitivity to self-conscious negative emotions. Self-handicapping, in light of its deflection of responsibility from the self to the self-imposed

obstacle, may serve to lessen the intensity of self-conscious emotions upon failure. Thus, the purpose of the present study is twofold: (1) to examine negative emotional responses to scenarios involving failure among those high and low in FF and (2), in light of the relevance of self-conscious negative emotions for FF (i.e., shame and embarrassment) and the defensive nature of self-handicapping, to examine whether self-conscious emotional reactions to a self-handicapping scenario differed from failure scenarios not involving self-handicapping among high FFs. We hypothesize that participants high in fear of failure will report more intense negative emotional responses to each failure scenario than those low in fear of failure. However, we expect the self-conscious negative emotions responses among high FFs to be less intense in the self-handicapping scenario relative to the other failure scenarios.

Method

Participants

The participants ($N = 48$) were University of Minnesota Rochester undergraduates. All participants were either freshman or sophomore Introductory Psychology students in a Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences program.

Design, Materials and Procedure

Participants completed the 25-item Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI; Conroy, 2003). Participants indicated, using a 5-point Likert scale, the degree to which they appraised intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences of failure (e.g., When I am failing, my future seems uncertain). The overall fear of failure score is composed of several subscales including: fear of devaluing one's self-estimate ($\alpha = .73$), fear of an uncertain future ($\alpha = .56$), fear of upsetting important others ($\alpha = .79$), fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment ($\alpha =$

.84), and fear of important others losing interest ($\alpha = .87$). The composite measure demonstrated adequate reliability among the present sample ($\alpha = .92$).¹

Per Sagar and Stoeber (2009), we utilized a scenario-based method to elicit affective response to failure. The affective scenarios all involved classroom examination failure but varied in terms of culpability of the self for failure. The scenarios were: a self-handicapping scenario that involved the use of a self-imposed obstacle prior to an exam, a scenario in which lack of ability was implicated in failure (i.e., substantial effort was put forth to prepare for an exam), and a scenario in which no cause of failure was indicated (i.e., the cause of failure was ambiguous). Participants indicated how they would feel in response to each situation, indicating the strength (1 to 5) of negative emotions (unhappy, disappointed, humiliated, and ashamed).

Results

Based on a median split, participants high ($n = 23$) and low ($n = 25$) in FF were compared in terms of mean responses to each failure scenario. Results of the comparisons are illustrated in Figure 1.

¹ Several other measures not utilized in the present study were also completed by participants.

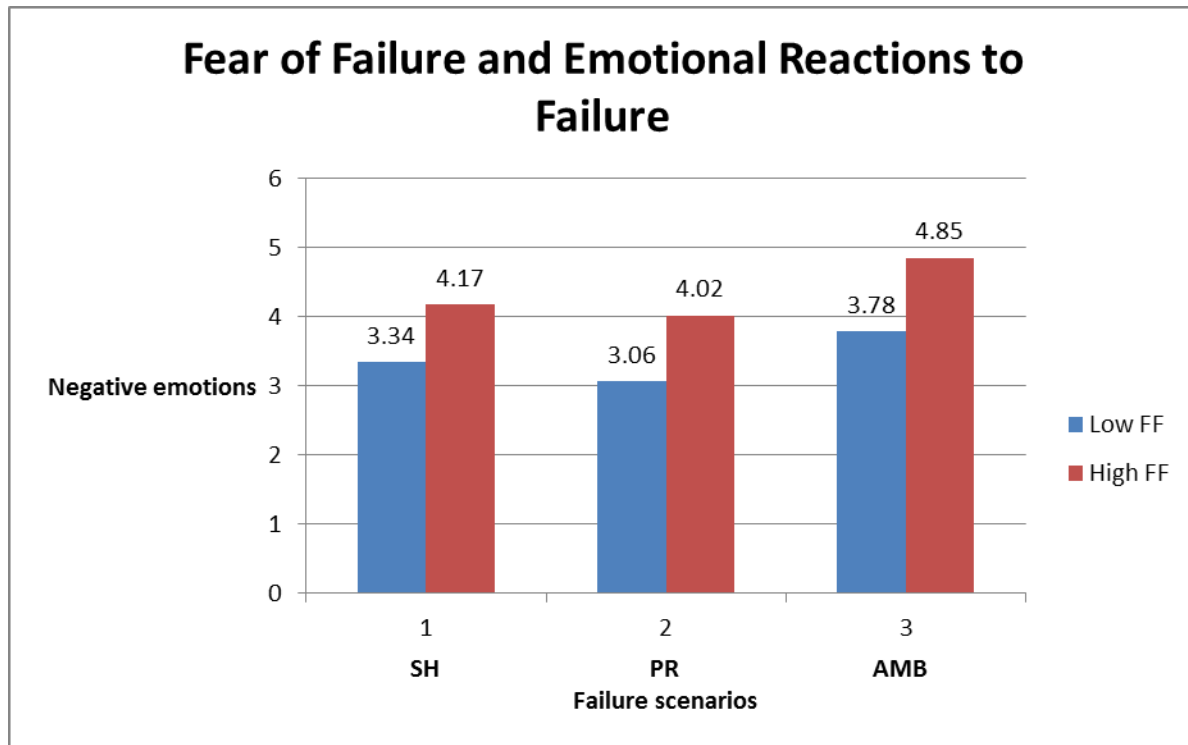


Figure 1. Mean differences in negative emotional responses to the self-handicapping scenario (SH), personal failure scenario (PR), and ambiguous failure scenario (AMB) among participants high and low in FF.

One-way ANOVA results indicated significantly higher negative emotions among the high FF group ($M = 4.17$; $SD = 0.87$) relative to the low FF group ($M = 3.34$; $SD = 1.08$) in response to a self-handicapping scenario, $F(1, 46) = 8.58$, $p < .01$, $r = .40$ (medium sized effect; Cohen, 1992). Likewise, high fear of failure participants reported more intense negative emotions ($M = 4.02$; $SD = 1.26$) than those low in fear of failure ($M = 3.06$; $SD = 1.10$) in the personal failure scenario, $F(1, 46) = 7.98$, $p < .01$, $r = .38$. Similar results were obtained for the ambiguous failure scenarios, $F(1, 46) = 25.90$, $p < .001$, in that high FF participants reported more intense negative emotions ($M = 4.85$; $SD = .28$) than those low in FF ($M = 3.78$; $SD = .97$), $r = .60$ (large effect).

With respect to the second aim of the study, paired-sample *t*-test results revealed significantly less self-conscious negative emotions (shame and humiliation) among high FF participants in response to a scenario in which the cause of failure was ambiguous ($M = 4.66$, $SD = .56$) compared to the self-handicapping scenario ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(21) = 4.79$, $p < .001$. The effect size was $r = .72$ (large effect). Results of this analysis are displayed in Figure 2. However, contrary to our hypothesis, no significant differences emerged between the personal failure and the self-handicapping scenarios.

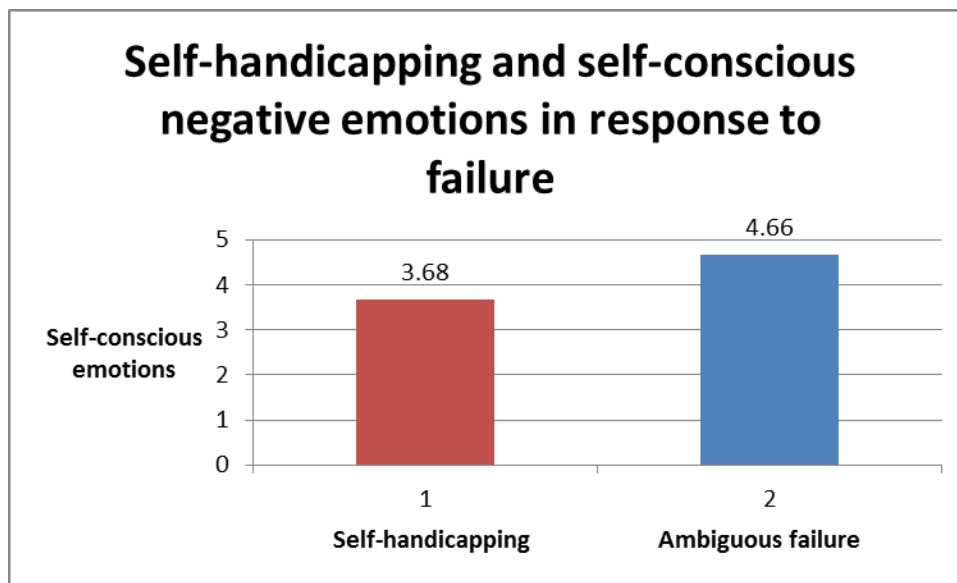


Figure 2. Mean differences in negative self-conscious emotional responses to the self-handicapping scenario and ambiguous failure scenario among participants high in FF.

Discussion

Our results indicated significantly greater negative reactions to failure among FFs across scenarios varying in terms of individual responsibility for failure relative to those low in FF. Such results are consistent with previous research indicating that individuals high in FF experience more intense negative emotional responses to failure (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009). In

terms of discrete emotions, the FF individual is also more likely to experience the self-conscious emotion shame, in part due to their tendency to overgeneralize failure (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). This emotional consequence of FF has been associated with physiological consequences as well, namely higher cortisol levels upon failure relative to those low in FF (Dickerson & Gable, 2004).

Shame being a painful, persistent, and cognitively disrupting emotion (Lewis, 2000), strategies which would lessen its frequency and intensity may be preferred by those sensitive to shame. Previous research suggests that self-handicapping is a strategy whose use is motivated by fear of failure (Elliot & Church, 2003). Our results indicate that the intensity of self-conscious negative emotions in response to failure among FFs may be attenuated by self-handicapping as participants reported significantly less intense shame and embarrassment in response to a scenario in which failure was preceded by self-handicapping relative to a scenario in which no such obstacle is in place. However, significant differences in self-conscious emotions did not emerge between high FFs in the self-handicapping scenario and scenario in which the students fail in spite of adequate preparation. It may be that putting forth adequate effort lessened anticipatory shame in that the attribution for failure was not a lack of ability as we had anticipated, but perhaps external, related to the exam itself or instructor.

Future research should consider the potential mediating role that attributions play in examining the relationships among fear of failure, self-handicapping and self-conscious negative emotions. Additionally, while previous research suggests concordance between online accounts of emotions and emotional responses to scenario-based methods (Robinson & Clore, 2001), future research should employ failure manipulations (e.g., via false feedback) and online assessments of affective responses in the laboratory. Likewise, rather than relying on

self-handicapping scenarios, behavioral self-handicapping manipulations (e.g., via practice time before a test) should be utilized. Future research will be needed to sort out the complex relationships between fear of failure, self-handicapping, and negative emotions.

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