Chapter 4. Michigan Studies of Fear of Failure

J. W. Atkinson

The theory of resistance proposed in *Dynamics of Action* (Atkinson & Birch, 1970, 1974) treats motivational implications of expectation of failure as analogous to expectation of success, but as opposite in motivational effect. We have yet to achieve consensus in the consideration of “fear of failure,” that is, whether it sometimes has a facilitating effect on motivation (Heckhausen, 1984a) or whether it always has a dampening effect (Atkinson, 1974b). I take this opportunity to review developments in the work at Michigan that led to our conception of *resistance* (Atkinson & Birch, 1970) and to two important conclusions: (a) that self-report measures of Test Anxiety provide the best assessment of individual differences in “fear of failure”; and (b) that sometimes the dampening of task motivation has the paradoxical effect of enhancing rather than inhibiting task performance. According to the latter conclusion, one cannot infer facilitating motivational effects of fear of failure from facilitating performance effects. Our discussion will supplement other recent discussions of resistance (Atkinson, 1982, 1983, 1984) in identifying some facts that any analysis of fear of failure must take into account.

As soon as we began to study behavioral correlates of TAT n Achievement, we were confronted with evidence of perceptual defense against failure (McClelland & Liberman, 1949; Moulton, Raphelson, Kristofferson, & Atkinson, 1958) and repression of failure (Atkinson, 1953) among men who were not highly motivated to achieve, as if they were, instead, motivated by fear of failure. From the outset, we faced the puzzle of fear of failure (avoidance) as distinct from hope of success (approach) in achievement situations. Work began concerning two questions: How can one measure fear of failure independently of n Achievement (or hope of success)? What is the most useful way to think about how fear of failure is expressed in behavior? We began trying to measure the motive of avoiding failure (thinking of it as analogous to the motive to achieve) before we had any clear conception of how a motive should be expressed in behavior. We did not have an explicit theoretical guide until the theory of achievement motivation was formulated. It gave equal weight and importance to expectations of success and of failure (Atkinson, 1957, 1958b).
In a secondary analysis of the data concerning motivational effects on recall of interrupted tasks, Moulton (1958) used nonrecall of interrupted tasks (failures) in an achievement-oriented situation as a basis for inferring fear of failure in the author of TAT stories written in this situation in order to discover how that fear was expressed in the content of imaginative stories. In addition to the negative categories of the n Achievement scoring manual — anticipations of failure, obstacles to achievement, unsuccessful instrumental achievement activity, and negative affect accompanying failure (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953) — Moulton, a clinical psychologist, found that daydreaming in achievement settings about nonachievement activity, the desire to leave a situation in which achievement evaluation might take place, and a preference for some other kind of activity instead were also symptomatic of fear of failure. The range of symptoms of avoidance motivation encompassed escape from an achievement situation (i.e., leaving the field) and even confronting an obstacle to the escape! The measure of fear of failure Moulton proposed had a correlation of \(-.38\) with recall of interrupted activities (i.e., failures) performed under achievement orientation, \(.47\) with recall of completed tasks (i.e., successes), and \(-.61\) with the magnitude of Zeigarnik effect. A measure of hope of success based only on the positive imaginative categories of the original n Achievement score had correlations of \(.67\), \(.18\), and \(.31\) respectively with the same measures. His net Hope of success score (subtracting f Failure from h Success) had correlations of \(.69\) with recall of “failures,” \(-.07\) with recall of “successes,” and \(.45\) with the magnitude of Zeigarnik effect. Results for TAT n Achievement were similar. This seemed a promising approach to the measurement of fear of failure until it was reconsidered in light of a concurrent study of avoidance of threatening material in imaginative behavior (Scott, 1956).

Applying the logic of the approach-avoidance conflict theory proposed by Lewin (1938), Scott was guided by this hypothesis: “If an S is sufficiently afraid of an event represented in the pictures, the stronger the cues for it become, the less likely will he be to talk or write about it in his imaginative stories” (Scott, 1956; p. 339, italics added). The avoidance of critical thematic content in a TAT-type story was regarded as a symbolic defense against anxiety, equivalent to an animal’s running away from a fear-arousing object. When “avoiders” (identified in this way) do remain in the presence of the threat by telling a story (either because the test condition is more relaxed or the picture stimulus is not as obviously highly cued), they should display symptoms of continuing fear in the stories.

Scott considered TAT data from one study concerning a war catastrophe and two studies concerning competition (achievement). The results confirmed the hypotheses and meant, in the context of achievement motivation, that those who are most fearful of failure avoid producing manifest content of the fear in response to achievement-related pictures, or when achievement-related motivation is aroused in them, but they do produce manifest symptoms of the fear when pictorial cues are more ambiguous or the test