A Comparison of Three Measures of the Motive to Avoid Failure:
Hostile Press, Test Anxiety, and Resultant Achievement Motivation

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Individual’s motive to avoid failure has typically been assessed by one of three different measures, the Hostile Press scoring system, the Test Anxiety Questionnaire, and Resultant Achievement Motivation. The present research tested the ability of these three measures to predict the two major behavioral criteria of the motive to avoid failure: defensiveness on level of aspiration tasks, and choice of extreme (high or low) probability of success tasks rather than intermediate level of difficulty tasks. Subjects completed the Thematic Apperception Test, which was scored for need for Achievement and the Hostile Press measure of fear of failure. Subjects also completed the Test Anxiety Questionnaire, the Achievement Test Preference Questionnaire, and an anagram level of aspiration task. The results demonstrated that only the Hostile Press measure was significantly related to the two behavioral criteria, and led the authors to conclude that the Hostile Press measure should be used in future assessment of the fear-of-failure motive.

Murray (1938) described the human motive called need Achievement (nAch) in terms such as “To excel one’s self,” (p. 164), and McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, and Lowell (1953) implemented a content analysis of stories written by individuals to pictures selected from Murray’s (1938) Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) as a measure of the motive. However, early work on motivation (e.g., Frank, 1935; Gould, 1939) demonstrated that two distinct motives existed in the individual, one to approach achievement.

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situations and one to avoid failure. For instance, McClelland and Liberman (1949) found that males in the upper and lower thirds of the nAch score distribution recognized negative achievement related words more quickly than males in the middle third of the distribution. These results led McClelland (1951) to posit a two-factor achievement motive composed of two concerns, one with the attainment of success and one with the avoidance of failure.

Although McClelland et al. (1953) had introduced a suitable index of the motive to attain success, the TAT-based measure, an index for the fear-of-failure motive was needed to assess the two-factor nAch motive. Atkinson and Litwin (1960) suggested using the Test Anxiety Questionnaire (TAQ) to measure fear of failure. Mandler and Sarason (1952) had developed the TAQ as an objective self-report of individuals' felt anxiety related to test taking, and some evidence (e.g., Mandler & Cowen, 1958; Sarason, Mandler, & Craighill, 1952) seemed to indicate that high TAQ scores were related to decrements in achievement test performance. The Atkinson and Litwin (1960) study has served as the basic validational study of the TAQ as a measure of fear of failure.

The work of Birney, Burdick, and Teevan (1969) on level of aspiration tasks yielded consistent relationships between TAT scores for nAch, need Affiliation (nAff) (Shipley & Veroff, 1952), and choices of strategy on the task. For instance, males who tended to have negative discrepancy scores (discrepancy score = prediction of performance for upcoming trial–actual performance on last trial) scored lowest on nAch and highest on nAff. The group with low positive discrepancy scores were highest in nAch, and the group with high positive discrepancy scores were midway on nAch and equal to the low positive group in nAff. Birney et al. suggested that certain patterns of discrepancy scores—specifically, the negative and high positive—can be construed as defensive in nature, and if it is failure that is being defended against, then these individuals should be high in fear of failure. An examination of TAT stories revealed what Murray (1938) termed "press," or stories that revolve around figures whose needs or goals are threatened. Thus Birney et al. developed a scoring system called Hostile Press imagery that focused on the press in TAT stories.

In an attempt to validate the Hostile Press measure of fear of failure, Birney et al. (1969) tested the effects of failure experiences on individuals' Hostile Press scores and found that Hostile Press scores rose following failure arousal. They suggested that males scoring high in Hostile Press will avoid achievement situations. Teevan (cited in Birney et al., 1969) found that males scoring high in Hostile Press tended not to volunteer to participate in an achievement task, while individuals low in Hostile Press tended to volunteer. When the task was affiliative in nature, there was no differential volunteer rate. Thomas and Teevan (cited in Birney et al., 1969)