Subjective Understanding of "Fear of Failure" among Emerging Adults in Kolkata, India: An Exploratory Study

Drisha Dey, Sneha Thander, and Deepshikha Ray
Department of Psychology, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal

The present study tries to explore the subjective understanding of "fear of failure" among 6 individuals who are in the phase of "Emerging Adulthood," i.e., with an age ranging from 21 years to 23 years, who belong to urban Kolkata using the qualitative data collection method of an in-depth interview. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse and interpret the data. Accordingly, 5 core themes were identified "perceived definition of failure", "reaction to failure", "positive attitude towards failure", "use of positive coping strategies", and "psychological approach to task with the potential of failure". The findings of the present study open up new perspectives to the understanding of the construct "fear of failure", for example, broadening the definition to include failure with respect to interpersonal relationships and loss of control and also possible adaptive consequences of "fear of failure" in enhancing self-growth and performance.

Keywords: fear of failure, emerging adulthood, in depth interview, interpersonal relationships

"Fear of Failure" has been defined as "persistent and irrational anxiety about failing to measure up to the standards and goals set by oneself or others" (APA, 2007). According to Higgins' (1997), "Regulatory Focus Theory", individuals engage in two types of self-regulation to align themselves with their goals: (i) promotion focus in which individuals focus on the positive / desirable aspects of attaining a goal, (ii) prevention focus where individuals focus on safety and security or avoidance of undesirable consequences in the pursuit of goals. It is needless to say that any kind of failure to accomplish a desired outcome may lead to rumination and unpleasant affect (Jones et al., 2013).

The concept of "fear of failure" has been variously examined in the psychology literature. According to Baker (1979), neurotic family relationships and attitude of the parents towards child's performance in various domains act as causal agents in the development of "fear of failure". Argyle and Robinson (1962) similarly proposed that parental expectations for achievement are positively correlated with "fear of failure" in children. Similar findings regarding the parents' response towards children's achievement, e.g., tendency to punish failure have been found to be associated with "fear of failure" (Teevan, 1983).

As early as 1938, Murray and Atkinson (1957) construed "fear of failure" as a dispositional tendency to avoid failure in achievement settings because failure leads to shame. Hence, according to these researchers, "fear of failure" is like a personality trait and is particularly related to the context of achievement / performance. Later on, Birney et al. (1969) proposed that "failure" per se is not the source of fear; rather the shame that accompanies failure is more feared. According to some other researchers like Elliot and Sheldon (1997), and Elliot (1999), the motivation underlying fear of failure is the avoidance of negative consequences of failure such as shame. Hence, for some other researchers, "fear of failure" is a motivational process. Thus, it is obvious that "fear of failure" is a multidimensional construct.

However, it has been verified through research that "fear of failure" detrimentally affects task- choice, amount of effort expended on a task, intrinsic motivation and well-being (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997; Heckhausen, 1975) and according to some authors, is uniformly present across sex and ethnicity (Covington, 1992; Hill, 1984).

Covington and Omelich (1979) had opined that individuals experiencing "fear of failure" often display a general deficit of confidence regarding their ability to succeed in any domain of life. A more recent understanding of "fear of failure" by Conroy et al. (2003) defines it as "a tendency to appraise threat and feel anxious during situations that involve the possibilities of failing". Thus, the construct of "fear of failure" in this definition moves beyond the restricted domain of achievement (academic / workplace). The fact that "fear of failure" may also comprise interpersonal situations was proposed previously by Golden (1988). According to him, the "fear of failure" in personal life and in work life may often be related and overlapping. Hence, although "fear of failure" may be conceived as a trait or a motive, the fact that it is embedded in the emotion of shame, suggests that "fear of failure" is intrinsically relational in nature.

As is evident from the above discussion, most studies on "fear of failure" have tried to investigate the antecedents of the construct such as parental attitude and behavior or have measured the association of the construct with psycho-social outcome variables such as sense of self efficacy or well-being. Considering the fact that there are multiple aspects in the definition of "fear of failure", it is necessary to understand how individuals subjectively interpret "fear of failure". "Emerging adulthood" is a critical period of

---

Author Note

Drisha Dey, Postgraduate Student, Department of Psychology University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal
Sneha Thander, Postgraduate Student, Department of Psychology University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal
Dr. Deepshikha Ray, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal
We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Drisha Dey, Postgraduate Student, Department of Psychology University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal
E-mail: drishadey08@gmail.com

development because it is characterized by increased autonomy, relative freedom from social control and also relative lack of traditional family responsibility such as marriage, child-birth etc. At the same time, "emerging adulthood" is also important for making critical decisions and choices in life such as choosing a career or a long-term relationship; situations which can typically evoke complicated emotions including "fear of failure". The present study thus, tries to unravel the subjective understanding of "fear of failure" in emerging adults of Kolkata origin using a qualitative paradigm.4

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 6 young adult individuals of the age range 21 years to 23 years who are residents of urban Kolkata and had a minimum educational attainment of completing undergraduate courses. Most of the individuals identified themselves as cisgender and one biologically female participant identified as bisexual. None of the individual participants had any recent (within the last 6 months) episode of significant psychological or physical distress. Purposive Sampling was done.

Measures

Socio-demographic Data Sheet was prepared to elicit relevant socio-demographic information of the participants such as age, sex, gender, educational qualifications etc.

In Depth Interview was conducted for each participant individually. An initial interview guide was prepared on the basis of the review of literature related to the construct of "fear of failure". Each participant was interviewed for a period of 30 minutes to 45 minutes. Participants were allowed to speak as spontaneously as possible with minimum prompts / open ended questions. Interviews had to be conducted online instead of in-person, owing to the restrictions posed by COVID-19. However, the online interviews were done through "Google Meet", and both the interviewer and interviewee kept their videos on in order to try to maintain the natural dyadic interactive situation of a face-to-face interview as much as practicable.

Laptop or Android device with facility to use "Google Meet."

Ethical Issues

Informed Consent for participation was taken from the participants

and the informed consent form consisted of the following points:

- Explaining the nature and purpose of the study
- Absence of any immediate financial or other benefits for participating
- Absence of any penalty (financial or otherwise) for refusing to participate and / or declining to participate after initially agreeing to do so
- Confidentiality of information shared and use of such information only for research purpose
- Permission of recording of conversation
- Since during the course of the interview, participants might experience emotional turmoil while sharing some emotionally sensitive information, the interviewer should be equipped to handle such situations and also allow the participants to withdraw at any point during the interview process.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The "thematic analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used for the purpose of analyzing and interpreting the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the process of "thematic analysis" entails identifying and reporting repeated patterns across a data set. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined a "theme" as "patterned response or meaning" derived from the data and related to the research question.

The process of constructing themes is not linear and is recursive in the sense that the researcher may have to circle back to earlier steps in light of new data or newly emerging themes. The following steps were undertaken during the analysis of the data.

- The conversational data were converted to transcripts.
- Familiarizing with the data or repeated active reading of the data.
- Generating initial / open codes an open code is the simplest psychologically meaningful unit of the data (Salander, 2015).
- Organizing the open codes into higher order focused codes in terms of similarity of content trying to find out meaningful connections.
- Rewording each focused code into themes or naming themes based on broader significance.
- Reviewing meaningful connections between themes across the data from different participants.

Results

Initial Themes	Core Themes
• Agony related to unfulfilled expectations.	
• Fear of inability to recover after repetition of major failure.	
• Hesitation to talk about one's failure acting as an indicator of fear of failure.	
• Negative impact of focusing on the outcome.	
• Temporary enhancement of negativity due to remaining isolated after experience of failure.	
• Contradictory emotions related to coping with failure.	
• Difficulty in overcoming unexpected failure.	
• Adverse psychological effects of facing failure.	
• Inclination to over think.	Reaction to failure
• Performance enhancing effect of fear of failure.	
• Positive effects of failure.	
• Failure brings a change of perspective.	Positive attitude
• Balanced outlook towards failure.	towards failure

- Failure and resilience are interrelated.
- Definition of failure is loss of positive outlook.
- Lack of independence, lack of personal satisfaction, and giving up is considered to be failure.
- Psychological distress in parental and romantic relationships.
- Complexity or maturity of cognition makes one more reticent to consequences of failure.
- Unfulfilled expectations of success with age lead to giving up and feelings of guilt are related to failure.
- Unfulfilled love is failure.
- Dissatisfaction in the pursuit of desires

Perceived definition of failure

- Healthy coping strategy regarding mentally abusive interpersonal romantic relationships by moving out of the relationship and prioritizing self-respect.
- Self-talk to bring back a positive and healthy outlook.
- Realization that brooding over the past could increase negative impact and one has control over one's present and future.
- Onset of overcoming failure related to prioritization of self over others' opinions and feelings.

Use of Positive coping strategy

- Any chance of success, satisfaction, and feeling of accomplishment act as motivators.
- Focus shifts from perfection to completing the execution.
- Initial fright leads to research and attempt.
- Importance of hard work and mitigation of chances and/or effects of failure.
- Unfulfilled expectations of success with age lead to giving up and feelings of guilt.

Approach to task with the potential of failure

Discussion

The findings of the present research provide some unique insights into the psychological process / construct of "fear of failure". The core themes identified in this study are:

- Perceived definition of failure
- Reaction to failure
- Positive attitude towards failure
- Use of Positive coping strategies
- Psychological approach to task with the potential of failure

It is obvious that the core themes vary considerably from the conventional notions of "fear of failure" which are marked by feelings of shame and tendency to avoid tasks where failure is a possible outcome. Rather, the findings of this study have unravelled complex dimensions and/ or subcomponents of "fear of failure".

The themes reflect that the emerging adult participants of this study do not construe "fear of failure" as a unidimensional experience, i.e., fear related to lack of personal accomplishment. Instead, many of them view "failure" as being related to constraints in autonomy and / or distress or associated with interpersonal relationships, particularly relationship with parents and romantic partner, in the spheres of initiating and / or sustaining a balanced relationship. Unlike the concept that "fear of failure" makes a person avoid tasks / situations where there is a potential for failure, these participants conceptualize the tendency to avoid a complex task or situation as a component of "failure". In a similar vein, according to these emerging adult participants, "fear of failure" does not occur simply because of an anticipatory anxiety related to failure; but it occurs after repeated unsuccessful attempts towards a task. Another unique reflection of these participants regarding "fear of failure" is that inordinate focus on negative outcomes of an action and lack of personal acceptance of failure may also lead to "fear of failure".

It is also important to note that these young people have simply not viewed failure as a negative experience fraught with psychological distress, but also as a stepping stone for further improvement and a scope for learning, and even believe that some amount of failure is a necessary precondition to be successful in life. They have also concurrently spoken about self-adaptive processes of overcoming failure such as avoiding preoccupation with negative thoughts, acceptance of limitations of self, identifying healthy coping strategies as well as the need to look at failure from a positive perspective. In this context, the issues of perseverance, forgiveness, moving out of abusive relationships, self-acceptance and positive self-talk have come up. In fact, there are research studies (Johnson et al., 2017) which have suggested that factors responsible for adaptive response to failure are attributional style, trait re-appraisal and emotional intelligence, etc.

Conclusion

One of the key aspects of the findings of this study is the possibility of re-appraisal of the concept of "fear of failure". Few issues which may be specially mentioned in this context are:

- Fear of failure is not restricted to situations which are performance / evaluation oriented. Fear of failure may be present in the context of interpersonal relationships also
- Failure may pave the way for opportunities for learning and broaden perspectives in life
- Anxiety related to failure may not always be detrimental and may promote investment of greater effort in a task
- Psychosocial processes which were previously conceived as

antecedents or consequences of fear of failure, have been proposed to be components of the experience of failure and / or the distress associated with it e.g. tendency to avoid a difficult task / situation, pre-occupation with possible negative outcomes

● Fear of failure may not be universally dispositional or motivational; rather it may emerge as a consequence of repeated experience of failure

These issues bring forth the necessity to explore psychological constructs from a paradigm which does not start with a pre-conceived notion of a psychological construct but, envisages to understand the construct in terms of subjective interpretation of the participants.

References

Alkhazaleh, Z., & Mahasneh, A. M. (2016). Fear of failure among a sample of Jordanian undergraduate students. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 9,* 53-60. https://doi.org/10.2147/prbm.s96384

Cantwell, D. P., & Baker, L. (1984). Research concerning families of children with autism. *The Effects of Autism on the Family*, 41-63. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-2293-9_3

Chakraborty, A., Ojo, E., Quonoey, B., & Mehta, G. (2021). Improving learning experience of people with cognitive disabilities using serious games: A review. *European Scientific Journal ESJ*, *17*(35), 1. https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2021.v17n35p1

Conroy, D. E., Kaye, M. P., & Fifer, A. M. (2007). Cognitive links between fear of failure and perfectionism. *Journal of Rational-Emotive Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, *25*(4), 237-253. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10942-007-0052-7

Elliot, A. J., & Thrash, T. M. (2004). The intergenerational transmission of fear of failure. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *30*(8), 957-971. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167203262024

Hackfort, D., Schinke, R. J., & Strauss, B. (2019). *Dictionary of sport psychology: Sport, exercise, and performing arts* (1st ed.). Academic Press.

Johnson, J., Panagioti, M., Bass, J., Ramsey, L., & Harrison, R. (2017). Resilience to emotional distress in response to failure, error or mistakes: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *52*, 19-42. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2016.11.007

Jones, N. P., Papadakis, A. A., Orr, C. A., & Strauman, T. J. (2013). Cognitive processes in response to goal failure: A study of ruminative thought and its affective consequences. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *32*(5), 482-503. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2013.32.5.482

Kiger, M. E., & Varpio, L. (2020). Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE guide no. 131. *Medical Teacher*, *42*(8), 846-854. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2020.1755030

Martin, A. J. (2012). Fear of failure in learning. In N.M. Seel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the sciences of learning* (pp. 1276-1278). Springer US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_266

McGregor, H. A., & Elliot, A. J. (2005). The shame of failure: Examining the link between fear of failure and shame. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *31*(2), 218-231. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167204271420