

## **Fear of Failure and the Academic Performance of Students from Low-Income Families**

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### **Abstract**

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*Among families in Sub-Saharan Africa where poverty is high, although academic success does not guarantee employment, it is seen as the only path to climbing up a socioeconomic ladder. As a result, there has been an academic ascension among students from low-income families. There is an assumption that parental demand, socioeconomic status and fear of failure are fueling the academic ascension among students from low-income families. This study used data from undergraduate students in Ghana to investigate the relationship between parental demand, academic performance, socioeconomic status and fear of failure among students from low-income families. The result revealed that fear of failure as a result of high parental expectation, perceptions of an uncertain socioeconomic future, and the avoidance of experiencing shame are challenging students from low-income families to improve their academic performance. It further revealed a perception that socioeconomic triumph is tied to educational triumph of students from low-income families.*

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**Keywords:** Fear of Failure, academic performance, students, low-income families

### **Introduction**

Among many families in developing countries where poverty is high, education is seen as the only path to climbing up a socioeconomic ladder. Although academic success does not guarantee employment, it has significant implications for future earning potential and life options; it does enhance the probability of securing employment and having a higher level of life-time earning. Conversely, academic failure is a critical issue with long-lasting consequences for individuals, families, and communities. It may lead to reduced productivity and a lack of civic engagement (Newcomb, Abbott, Catalano, Hawkins, Battin-Pearson, & Hill, 2002). Birney, Burdick, and Teevan (1969) considered the experiences of success and failure in an inter-personal context and argue that the possibility of non-attainment of a goal can produce fear. They asserted that society values high achievers and measures people's worth by their personal successes. Therefore, people fear the aversive consequences of failure and those who are described as fearful of failure may be simply fearful of losing value in the eyes of others. Thus, by failing in achievement contexts, individuals are faced with the possibility of self-devaluation, social devaluation, and punishment.

Many students from low-income families in many parts of the developing world see their academic success as the only chance to rewrite the ending to a family story full of social and economic challenges that went off track many years earlier. The fear of failing to succeed in one's socioeconomic life is perceived to be a potent catalyst for high academic performance among students from low-income background. Heckman (2008; 2011) in his research conducted in the United States noted that students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families possess lower levels of cognitive and non-cognitive skills and lag far behind their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. Many research studies continue to link lower Socioeconomic status to lower academic achievement and slower rates of academic progress as compared with higher Socioeconomic status communities.

A study by Aikens and Barbarin (2008) in the United States assert that children from low socioeconomic environments acquire language skills more slowly, exhibit delayed letter recognition and phonological awareness, and are at risk for reading difficulties. Children from low socioeconomic thus are in a very bad situation in terms of education in almost every possible way; low support from parents and community. As a result, not only academics are low, but also psychological development and possibilities for career are looks slim. In 2008, statistics from the National Center for Education in the United States revealed that in 2007, the high school dropout rate among persons 16-24 years old was highest in low-income families (16.7 percent) as compared to high-income families (3.2 percent). However, many students from low-income families in developing countries are believed to have high confidence in managing academic task demand, show more intense interest in school and have low adverse emotional reactions when they come across difficulties academically. It is perceived that the fear of failing academically among students from low-income families resulting in having uncertain socioeconomic future and to disappoint parents, significant others in their family, peers and community are contributing factors fueling a high academic ascension among students from low-income families. Researchers in achievement motivation generally agree that achievement behaviors are driven by either approach or avoidance tendencies, which were originally described by Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, and Sears (1944) as reflecting the goal of approaching success or avoiding failure.

According to Sagar et al., (2007), perceiving the consequences of failure to be aversive, provides the basis for fear of failure, and the anticipation of a threatening outcome elicits fear. Even though the extent to which individuals will fear the possible consequences of failure can differ or expressed differently in individuals' behaviors (Birney et al., 1969), it is believed that fear relating to failure becomes more evident when the future success is contingent upon academic achievement. Researchers in educational psychology emphasize that fear relating to failure is a determinant of student's behavior and performance (Elliot & Church, 1997). Motivational research identified the motive to avoid failure as an energizing means for human behavior (Conroy & Elliot, 2004). Researchers argue that failure may pose a threat to the self and instill a state of insecurity that motivates behavior aimed at correcting a situation and thus improve performance (Belanger et al., 2012). According to Conroy et al. (2002) and Birney et al. (1969), beliefs in aversive consequences of failure provide the basis for fear of failure, and according to Lazarus (1991, 2000), anticipation of a threatening outcome elicits fear. At present the existing models of fear of failure have not been subject to research evaluation within the context of academic performance among students from low-income families. In addition, it is not known whether the perceived consequence of fear of failure among students from low-income families in the developing world is consistent with those reported in academic achievement settings. The aim of this study is first, to investigate if there is a positive relationship between fear of failure, academic performance and socioeconomic status among students from low-income families and secondly, to explore their perceptions of the aversive consequences of failure in academic situation. The study uses data from a survey carried out in Ghana (a developing country in sub-Sahara Africa). A qualitative method of inquiry was deemed suitable to determine the perception, emotions, and concerns associated with fear of failure in academic settings and to provide a holistic understanding of the students' experience (Turner, 1994).

### **The nature of fear**

Fear is considered to be a state of being apprehensive or scared (Gullone & King, 1993), and an adaptive aspect of development that warns of danger or a perceived threat that one seeks to avoid or overcome (Barlow, 2002; Field & Lawson, 2003; Gerull & Rapee, 2002; Gullone, 1999). It is a subjective emotion that is a state of mind or feeling that has antecedents in the environment that leads to certain causal consequences in behavior (Gary, 1987). Fear is considered to be "a normal reaction to a real or imagined threat" (Gullone & King, 1993) that occurs and is displayed over the course of normal child development (as differentiated from clinical fear or phobia)

### **Fear of failure**

Fear of failure is described as the motive of avoiding failure in achievement settings which involves cognitive, behavioral and emotional experience (Atkinson, 1957; McGregor & Elliot, 2005; Murray, 1938). It is associated with anticipatory shame in evaluative situations (Atkinson, 1957; McGregor & Elliot, 2005). According to Elliot (1997), fear of failure is triggered when one is confronted with the possibility of failing at a given task. The works of (Brunstein, 2000; Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996; Peters, Greenberg, Williams, & Schneider, 2005) has further proven that whereas success information on self-defining tasks has little effect on performance, failure leads to an increase in subsequent performance.

McClelland (1958) assert that fear of failure is a motive deeply rooted in self-evaluative disposition that is socialized during childhood. Individuals become concerned about the aversive consequences of failing such as disappointing oneself and significant others (Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002; Elliot & Thrash, 2004) and experiencing negative emotions that comes with it (Rice et al., 2009). Fear of failure is well-known across levels of student's actual and perceived ability and in both sexes (Covington, 1992; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997). Various studies on the concept of fear of failure in academic settings according to Sagar et al (2007) shows that the effect of fear of failure include greater anxiety, unstable self-esteem, perceptions of low control, pessimism, and self-handicapping (Martin & Marsh, 2003) and increased cheating in academic tasks (Monte & Fish, 1989). They also include adopting avoidance achievement goals (Elliot & Church, 1997), decreased subjective well-being, poorer grades (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997), decreased intrinsic motivation, and decreased quality of engagement in achievement situations/pursuits (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997).

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

A sample of 126 males and 104 female undergraduate students (freshmen) from two Ghanaian universities volunteered to participate. Age among the sample ranged from 18 to 24. Data from the two participating universities indicated that the undergraduates were generally from a background that matched the socio-economic distribution of Ghanaian students. 190 students indicated that they are from a low-income family while 40 indicated that they are from socio-economically advantaged family.

### ***Procedure***

After receiving the consent from participants, they were informed of the aim of the study and its voluntary nature. Participants were made aware of how vital honesty in response was for the study and that data would be used only for research purposes and kept strictly confidential. Participants were also informed that they could decline answering any question they wished to and that they could terminate the interview at any point, should they wish to. A semi-structured, in-depth interview was conducted with each student individually to allow them to relate to their own experiences in a more free and open manner, and to disclose more information. The interviews were aimed at ascertaining the student's perception and experience of fear of failure, and their motive to avoid failure academically. The questions were retrospective in nature where students were asked to describe how they behave when they experience the fear of failing academically and the perceived consequences of failing academically for example the fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment, fear of having an uncertain future, fear of devaluing one's self-estimate, fear of important others losing interest and the fear of upsetting important others.

### ***Data analysis***

All interviews were transcribed and inductively analyzed using the principles of thematic analysis (Smith, 1995) and some principles of grounded theory analysis [example coding, constant comparison, memo writing (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)] to identify common themes and categories that represented perceived consequence of failure, experience of fear of failure, and motive to avoid failure academically. The basic units of analysis were the raw-data quotes that were extracted from the interview transcripts. These were quotes that captured a distinct concept and were "a segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode or piece of information" (Tesch, 1990). These quotes were organized into a hierarchical structure of themes and categories. The inductive process, which moves through several stages, reveals essential themes (by determining which parts of the descriptions are essential and which are not) and determines the relation between the themes and how they reflect the phenomena studied, therefore allowing for meaning of social phenomena to be explained (Sullivan, 2003).

### ***Result section***

Letting down significant others and important others losing interest was perceived as one of the source of fear of failure by 93% of students from low-income families which they stated they disliked. They were of the perception that not meeting expectations leads to letting down significant others. For example: "I worry about letting down my friends, close relatives as well as my parents if I fail in my academics. They have a lot of faith in me to perform better to prove the wealth of every money and support they give me"; "I fear that I will be disappointing my parents if I fail, because they have helped me so much. They make sure I don't lack any support I need academically knowing very well that we don't have good financial standing".

One student captured these fears when she disclosed, “I fear that I won’t live up to my mother and sibling’s expectation. I fear that I might disappoint them greatly if I don’t get a top result academically...That’s the major part of my worry...I’m afraid that I’m going to disappoint [them]...If you don’t like your family, then you don’t fear what they think and feel...My dad might say he’s happy with me but I feel like being a disappointment if I don’t meet their academic expectations”.

Fear of upsetting important others related to student’s perceiving that their failure will upsets and displeases parents and close relations. For example: “Failure will make my parents disappointed especially my dad will be very unhappy...that fear of failure makes me want to learn more and achieve the right result to make my parents happy and proud of me”; “Coming from a poor home if you fail or keep failing, family members who help you financially will not want to help you anymore. They want to see the value of the money they spend on you academically and it can only be shown by performing above standard”. “My uncle pays for my education...he goes quiet on me when I don’t perform up to his expectation and makes me know he’s angry”. “My senior brother will be just distraught and so angry, my parents will be also disappointed and really upset”. “I worry about what other people might feel if I fail, like if I don’t get to [meet] their expectations”. Upsetting important others also related to students perceiving that their failure will upsets and displeases family friends and other people in their community who expect them to be role model to their kids academically. For example: “I study more than I should because I become afraid that people might think I am wasting the little resources of my family. I believe no one will want their child to be like me in the community if I should perform poorly at school”. “Sometimes when you live in a community, you become like a family with your neighbors and they will always want to know how you are progressing academically. It makes me afraid to fail academically most times... it will be a big disappointment for me if I should fail”.

High parental expectation was mentioned as a fear factor that drives students from low-income family to perform better even with little financial support. Academic qualification is seen by many low-income parents as an investment in their children life and they expect a financial support in return when their children graduate from tertiary institution and find a job. For example, “I always have this fear in me that if I don’t succeed academically, I will be letting down people whose future socioeconomic wellbeing depends on me especially my parents”; “my parents always remind me of the money they spend on my academics instead of investing it somewhere for their future when they grow older and cannot work.... It makes me feel I have a responsibility towards them financially when I graduate from the university. I fear I might not be able to pay them back fairly if I should fail in my academics... it is always on my mind and motivates me to focus on my academics”.

Fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment, and a negative social evaluation emerged as a factor that is pushing students from low-income families to avoid academic failure. They cited negative judgments and low regard from others, especially loss of others’ respect, and loss of others’ interest in them within their community if they fail academically. The socio-culture structure of some developing countries especially sub-Sahara Africa does not give people the chance to live an individualistic life. People tend to live as one big family in communities, that is the reason why they afraid to fail academically. This was cited by 91% of respondents during the interview. Negative judgment and low regard from others related to perceptions of being judged negatively after failure. For example, “your community judges you negatively when you don’t meet their academic expectations”; is a shame for me and probably my immediate family, for people in my community to see me go to school every day and fail academically”. “The society is proud of you when you go to school especially at the university level. It will be really shameful and embarrassing for me to fail; no I can’t afford to fail”. “I know that people are going to judge me by my academic performance all the time and it makes me fear to fail . . . knowing that people will be looking at me as a failure with a negative mind set and opinion about me will make me feel like a failure, and I don’t want that to happen”. “I fear that failure might show me up and people who don’t know me very well will carry the judgment that I’m not a good student academically, and I want them to think that I am excellent academically”. “If you’ve failed to reach the expectations, people start to look down at you and might treat you in different way when academic issues are being discussed.

Have an uncertain socioeconomic future was perceived as an aversive consequence of failing to perform well academically by all respondents. The respondents perceive that their socioeconomic triumph is tied to their educational triumph because education is an established path toward success in life and is the only way out of poverty. Students from poverty-driven families always see and read about the success story of people who performed better academically.

This energizes students from socioeconomically disadvantaged background to fight and attain very good academic result since education is the driver of social mobility. Not performing very well academically is perceived as a lost opportunity to having a better socioeconomic life. For example: “the fear of failing causes me to worry about the consequences of my failure, like you worry about how your future will be and what you are likely to be doing with your life in the future”. “Failure means you can’t even fight for the few jobs around because even those with good academic qualifications are struggling to find job how much more a failure; Failing means you don’t even stand the chance to mingle with certain class of people who have the connections to finding a good job”. “Those who come from socioeconomically advantaged homes mostly have the connections to where the jobs are; sometimes the only way to get the job is to prove that you are better with your academic success”. “Everybody knows that wealth people take their children to good schools and give them the best education. So, to compete with them academically as someone from a low-income family is to study more than they probably do. If want to be on the same level with them and compete for the few jobs available and hopefully help change the socioeconomic misfortunes of your family.”

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study is to investigate if there is a positive relationship between fear of failure, academic performance and socioeconomic status among students from low-income families and to explore their perceptions of the consequences of failing academically that makes them fear. These findings represent the perceived consequences of failure among students from low-income families that they dislike and wanted to avoid hence resulting in their high academic performance. The most common perceived consequences of failure cited by the students were having an uncertain socioeconomic future, upsetting important others, important others losing interest, having negative social evaluation and experiencing shame and embarrassment. According to Lazarus (1991, 2000), anticipation of a threatening outcome elicits fear and Conroy et al. (2002) and Birney et al. (1969) claim that beliefs in aversive consequences of failure provide the basis for fear of failure. Threat, according to Lazarus (1991), is the condition of the person when confronted with a stimulus that he or she appraises as endangering important values and goals. Thus, when individuals perceive that important goals are endangered, they appraise the situation as a threat. Accordingly, when the demands of performing well academically to an expectation are not met, students from low-income families can appraise it as threatening to their goal of better socioeconomic future and pleasing important others.

In other words, they may perceive that failure to performing well academically will endanger their chances of achieving their desired goals, and thus perceive failure as a threat. The study revealed that students from low-income families perceived academic failure as more shameful and embarrassing. They feel that their value will decrease for their parents and significant others who provide financial support and make them less interested in their academics. This may result in diminished perception of self-worth depending on one’s accomplishments, since ability is perceived as the major component of success while inability is perceived as the major cause of failure (Covington, 1986). Therefore, failure could be perceived as an indication of one’s inability to succeed and would be perceived as having aversive consequences for perceptions of self and as a threat to one’s feelings of self-worth. The basic assumption of self-worth theory of achievement motivation (Covington & Beery, 1976) is that achievement behavior is largely the result of people’s efforts to protect their sense of personal esteem, since in our society self-worth depends largely on one’s ability and accomplishments. Ability is seen as a major contributor to feelings of self-regard, especially when ability is perceived as instrumental to ensuing achievement. Variations in self-perceived ability account for the differences in pride reactions in success and in humiliation reactions to failure. Therefore, a threat (such as failure) to the sense of worth that depends greatly on maintenance of accomplishments and ability will elicit fear but for many students in the developing world this fear becomes a motivating factor to achieve academic success to protect their sense of self-worth.

About 40 percent of students from low income families and students from socioeconomically advantaged families who were interviewed reported a loss of motivation after academic failure and having thoughts of changing their program of study, thus perceiving failure to have aversive consequences for motivation. This finding is consistent with a report by Conroy et al. (2001) that some adult athletes and performing artists in the United States perceived failure to decrease their motivation. Hence, failure can prevent performers attaining high standards of performance and reaching their potential (Conroy et al., 2001). Covington (1986) proposed that the threat of failure promotes irrational strategies for defensive purposes and that achievement behavior, particularly its motivational aspects, is largely mediated by perceptions of ability.

Moreover, Birney et al. (1969) posited that individuals fearful of failure can decrease their effort in the task to defend against losses of self-esteem and social respect, and experiencing embarrassment upon failure by attributing failure to lack of effort. Accordingly, this study proposes that loss of motivation post-failure and having thoughts of dropping out of a particular program of study, are behaviors that serve to defend students' perceptions of their ability and competence, their social value, and hence their sense of worth. Based on this body of research and on the proposition that individuals fear the consequences of failure if they perceive them to be aversive (e.g. Birney et al., 1969; Conroy et al., 2002), this study propose that students from low income families that perceive failure to have aversive consequences for their relationship with their parents, close relations as well as community might perceive failure as a threat to such relationships, and thus fear it. These experiences either lead to a state of anxiety which can seriously disturb the individual student's ability to react positively to any situation and in a certain environment or may keep them alert and serve as a source of motivation to improve their progress of learning and academic performance.

Some students also stated that they received more attention after failure from their parents and close relations, but the nature of the attention was of criticism, which explains why they perceived failure to have aversive consequences for them. Criticism, or being "told off" as some of the students referred to it, can be perceived as punishment of failure and therefore can be anticipated and feared, and thus may contribute to fear of failure (Birney et al., 1969). Criticism typically leads to experiencing shame and embarrassment, which are at the core of fear of failure (e.g. Conroy, 2004; McGregor & Elliot, 2005). Achievement situations typically involve social evaluation that can be threatening if a child anticipates failing and receiving negative appraisals from others (Scanlan, 1984). Lazarus (1991) stated that appraisal that one has failed to meet one's ego-ideal (and others' ideals) elicits emotions of shame, humiliation, and embarrassment. Thus shame is associated with the perception of personal failure. McGregor and Elliot (2005) posited that shame is a highly aversive emotional experience that is grounded in global self-devaluation and that that shame leads to fearing failure. They suggested that individuals high in fear of failure (compared with those low in fear of failure) experience greater shame upon failure, are more likely to generalize specific failure experience to the global self, and are more likely to have relational concerns upon failure. Furthermore, these individuals orient to and seek to avoid failure and making mistakes in achievement settings and, as such, this avoidance of failure is likely to be a self-perpetuating process that serves to maintain and exacerbate the tendency to avoid failure, leading to more mistakes and failures (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). But in the case of this study of students from low income families in developing countries, the study revealed that many of these students fear of failure and making mistakes in achievement settings becomes a motivation factor to succeed academically.

Similarities were found between the perceived aversive consequences of failure identified in this present study and those in the models of Birney et al. (1969) and Conroy et al. (2002). For example, diminished perception of self, correspond to Birney and colleagues' and Conroy and colleagues' fear of devaluing one's self-estimate. Having an uncertain future corresponds to Conroy and colleagues' fear of uncertain future and Birney and colleagues' fear of non-ego punishment. Letting down significant others corresponds to Conroy and colleagues' fear of upsetting important others and to Birney and colleagues' fear of reduction of social value. Finally, loss of others' interest corresponds to Birney and colleagues' fear of reduction of social value and to Conroy and colleagues' fear of important others losing interest. The study also revealed other similarities between the perceived consequences of failure reported by the students from low income families and students from socioeconomically advantaged families. These included diminished perception of self, no sense of achievement, emotional cost of failure, displeasing significant others and reduced recognitions which suggest that fear of failure has a level of negative effect on students irrespective of the socioeconomic status and emotional support they receive.

The result of the study would suggest the need to understand more fully the nature and costs of the continuing mismatch of cultural and societal values that confronts many students in many parts of the globe, both with respect to the goals of schooling and the means by which these goals are achieved. In this regard, the pathway to responsible educational change would seem to lie in widening the legitimate reasons for learning as well as the permissible means for achieving excellence, including cooperation and sharing. Low Socioeconomic status and its correlates, such as poverty as well as poor health, ultimately affect academic performance in our society as a whole.

Inequities in wealth distribution, resource distribution and quality of life are increasing in developing countries especially Sub-Sahara Africa which affects the academic well-being of many students especially those from poor neighborhoods. Society benefits from an increased focus on the foundations of socioeconomic inequities and efforts to reduce the deep gaps in socioeconomic status in the United States and abroad. Behavioral and other social science professionals possess the tools necessary to study and identify strategies that could alleviate these disparities at both individual and societal levels

## **Conclusion**

The data and the obtained results show that fear of failure can really hinders the ability of students to perform well in their academic activities, but low levels of fear of failure can motivate students to improve their abilities and develop new strategies in achieving academic success. The result also suggests that assisting students in viewing failure as an opportunity to learn from mistakes and de-emphasizing the relevance of one instance of failure on one's global self-estimate would be of primary importance. Besides this, students need to be instructed to think positively in building up a new way of learning.

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