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# The Shame of Failure: Examining the Link Between Fear of Failure and Shame

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*The present research was designed to examine hypotheses derived from the proposition that shame is the core of fear of failure. Study 1 was conducted in a naturalistic setting and demonstrated that individuals high in fear of failure reported greater shame upon a perceived failure experience than those low in fear of failure. These findings were obtained controlling for other negative emotions. Study 2 was conducted in a controlled laboratory setting and demonstrated that high fear of failure individuals reported greater shame, overgeneralization, and closeness to their mother (controlling for baseline levels of these variables) than those low in fear of failure. Those high in fear of failure also reported that they would be less likely to tell their mother and father about their failure experience and would be more likely to tell their mother and father about their success experience. The implications of these findings for acquiring a deeper understanding of fear of failure are discussed.*

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**Keywords:** shame; fear of failure; motivation; avoidance

**F**or more than 60 years, motivational theorists have studied the nature and consequences of dispositional fear of failure (Atkinson, 1957; Birney, Burdick, & Teevan, 1969; Conroy, 2001; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Heckhausen, 1991; Murray, 1938). Empirical work on this avoidance-oriented achievement motive has demonstrated that it leads to a host of deleterious processes and outcomes (for reviews, see Atkinson & Feather, 1966; Elliot & Thrash, 2004; McClelland, 1987). Although this research has contributed greatly to our understanding of the effects of fear of failure, it has not delved deeply into the basis of the motive itself to understand the reason that individuals are fearful of, and motivated to avoid, failure.

In their pioneering work, David McClelland and his colleagues (McClelland, 1951; McClelland, Atkinson,

Clark, & Lowell, 1953) proposed that motive dispositions are grounded in emotional experience: "A motive is the learned result of pairing cues with affect or the conditions which produce affect" (McClelland et al., 1953, p. 75). McClelland's colleague, John Atkinson (1957) proceeded to posit a link between the two basic achievement motives, need for achievement and fear of failure, and specific emotions. Atkinson (1957) portrayed need for achievement as "the capacity to feel pride in accomplishment" and fear of failure as "the capacity or propensity to experience shame upon failure" (p. 360).

Surprisingly, little research has been conducted on the link between motives and particular types of affective experience. Furthermore, the limited work that has been done has focused exclusively on approach motives, specifically, need for achievement, need for affiliation, and need for power (see Zurbriggen & Sturman, 2002). As such, Atkinson's proposition that shame is the core of fear of failure has yet to receive empirical attention.

Atkinson did not provide an explicit rationale for his fear of failure–shame proposal. In conceptualizing motive-emotion links in the achievement domain, he focused primarily on need for achievement; fear of failure received only cursory attention. It appears that

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Atkinson linked shame to fear of failure simply because he viewed shame as the reciprocal of pride, much as he viewed fear of failure as the reciprocal of need for achievement. In the present research, we develop a rationale for establishing shame as the core of fear of failure by considering the nature of shame as an emotion grounded in general self-devaluation and concern about relational disruption. We then proceed to report two studies that examine the link between fear of failure and shame (and its concomitants).

#### *Fear of Failure and Its Origins*

Fear of failure may be construed as a self-evaluative framework that influences how the individual defines, orients to, and experiences failure in achievement situations (Heckhausen, 1991). The minimal research that has been conducted on the origins of fear of failure seems to suggest that it is rooted in parental socialization and parent-child relations. Teevan (1983) demonstrated that children high in fear of failure have mothers who punish failure but react neutrally to success. C. Smith (1969; see also Argyle & Robinson, 1962) showed that mothers of boys high in fear of failure set high achievement standards for their sons but do not view their sons as having the ability to achieve those standards. Schmalt (1982; see also Teevan & McGhee, 1972) examined the timing of parental expectations for their children's achievement and independence behaviors and found a positive relationship between early expectations and child fear of failure. Maternal irritability and dependency (Singh, 1992), as well as paternal absence from the home (Greenfeld & Teevan, 1986), also have been shown to be positively associated with child fear of failure.

Most pertinent to the present research is a series of studies recently conducted by Elliot and Thrash (2004). In this research, parent fear of failure was shown to be a positive predictor of child fear of failure, and love withdrawal was documented as a mediator of mother-child, but not father-child, fear of failure concordance. Mothers high in fear of failure were more likely to withdraw love from their child when their child made a mistake or failed, and this love withdrawal led to fear of failure in the child. Thus, although fear of failure is a competence-based motive, it appears to be deeply rooted in affiliation issues, particularly those involving parent-child relations.

Overall, the extant data indicates that individuals high in fear of failure are socialized in a way that orients them to the possibility of failure, that exerts pressure on them to succeed beyond their capacity, and that exacts relational costs should failure occur. These individuals appear to have learned to define failure as an unacceptable event that carries negative implications for their

self-worth and relational security, which leads them to vigilantly orient to and seek to avoid failure in achievement situations.

#### *The Dynamics of the Shame Experience*

Shame is a highly aversive emotional experience that is integrally associated with avoidance and withdrawal tendencies (Mascolo & Fischer, 1995). Several studies have shown that participants experiencing shame report an intense desire to "hide" or "shrink into the floor" to disappear or escape from the shame-eliciting situation (H. B. Lewis, 1971; M. Lewis, 1992; Tangney, 1995). Other studies have shown that when individuals are experiencing shame, they collapse their shoulders and move their head and eyes in a downward motion, as though to escape the gaze of others (Izard, 1971; Keltner, 1997). Thus, self-report and observational data are concordant in linking shame to an urge to get away from or, at minimum, visually avoid the context in which shame was evoked.

Many emotion theorists have articulated the role of the self and self-evaluation in the shame experience. H. B. Lewis (1971) conceptualized shame as the reproach we feel for ourselves when we have fallen short of our standards; others have suggested that shame results from a failure to live up to roles or goals (M. Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000), from a failure in moral action (Tangney, 2002), or from any event in which the self fails to meet the requirements of socially proscribed action (R. Smith, Webster, Parrott, & Eyre, 2002). Weiner (1986) posited that feelings of shame are experienced when one fails and attributes the failure to a lack of ability. Several theorists have proposed that shame is experienced when a person feels that he or she is becoming his or her undesired or feared self (Gilbert, 1998; Ogilvie, 1987). Shame is presumed to be a devastating emotion because it entails a sense that one's entire self has been found to be a failure or bad and is thus globally defective (M. Lewis, 1992; Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994).

Of importance, when experiencing shame, an individual not only feels that the global self is defective but that this defective self is exposed before a real or imagined audience and is judged unworthy of love (Andrews, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Indeed, several theorists have hypothesized that shame is a signal or cue of a failure in the self that jeopardizes attachments to, and relationships with, important others (Averill et al., 1994; Barrett, 1995). Several developmental researchers have suggested that parental reactions to children's behaviors form the basis of the shame reaction to failure (Schore, 1998; Stipek, 1995). Specifically, when parents respond with strong emotion (e.g., disgust) to their child's failure to meet a specific standard, the child typically experiences shame (M. Lewis, 1992), and this type of experi-

ence may form a lasting sensitivity to the possibility of rejection from not only parents but significant others more generally (Downey & Feldman, 1996). From this perspective, the function of shame is to evoke behavior designed to hide the self from the scrutiny of significant others, thus minimizing the likelihood of loss of love and rejection (Mascolo & Fischer, 1995; Thrane, 1979).

*The Fear of Failure-Shame Link and the Primary Hypotheses of the Present Research*

Clearly, important conceptual links exist between the fear of failure and shame constructs. Both constructs are inherently focused on failure, both are grounded in avoidance tendencies, both involve self-evaluation, and both connect failure to love loss and abandonment. As such, shame appears well suited to serve as the core emotion of the fear of failure motive.

We view fear of failure as a self-evaluative framework in which failure is construed as an indicator of global incompetence that puts the self at risk of rejection and abandonment by significant others (Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002; Elliot & Thrash, 2004). Parental use of global negative attributions for failure and love withdrawal upon failure is posited to establish a link between the onset of failure and the experience of shame. Over time and repeated associations, this failure-shame link is strengthened until it becomes a "dispositional capacity or propensity to experience shame upon failure" (Atkinson, 1957, p. 360). Given the acute painfulness of the shame experience, the individual learns to orient toward failure and seeks to avoid failure in achievement situations.

The first hypothesis of the present research falls directly out of this conceptualization of fear of failure: Upon failure, individuals high in fear of failure will experience more shame than those low in fear of failure. This hypothesis follows directly from Atkinson's (1957) proposition that shame is the core emotion of fear of failure.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 of the present research do not follow directly from Atkinson's proposition but may be derived from it based on our conceptualization of fear of failure and the extant shame literature. Our second hypothesis is that individuals high in fear of failure will be more likely to generalize a specific failure experience to the global self than those low in fear of failure. Conceptually, global self-devaluation is integral to the shame experience (H. B. Lewis, 1971) and research has documented that shame is positively correlated with global negative judgments of the self (Tangney, 2002). Furthermore, research has linked parental use of person-focused (in contrast to behavior-focused) negative feedback in the socialization process to avoidance-based self-regulation in achievement situations (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Thus, if shame is indeed the core of

fear of failure, failure in achievement situations should be perceived as an indicator that the global self is deficient.

Our third hypothesis is that individuals high in fear of failure will display more concern about relational disruption when they fail than will those low in fear of failure. Concern about relational disruption, such as global self-devaluation, is a central aspect of the shame experience, because shame is presumed to represent a signal or cue that relationships with important others are in jeopardy. The aforementioned research (Elliot & Thrash, 2004) demonstrating that parents' use of love withdrawal upon their children's mistakes and failures leads to fear of failure in their children highlights the important role of parent-child relational disruption in fear of failure. Parents are the initial interpreters of children's achievement outcomes (Eccles, 1997), and any relational contingencies that parents attach to such outcomes are likely to have a long-term impact on how children orient to achievement tasks and respond to achievement outcomes. These relational contingencies are likely to generalize to significant others but to remain rooted, dynamically, in the parent-child relationship (Bowlby, 1969). Thus, in the present research, we predicted that individuals high in fear of failure, relative to those low in fear of failure, would report feeling less close to their parents after failure and would report being less likely to tell their parents of their failure experience.

#### STUDY 1

##### *Pilot Study<sup>1</sup>*

Prior to directly testing our first hypothesis in Study 1, we conducted a pilot study designed to examine the general link between shame and fear of failure. Specifically, if shame is the emotional core of fear of failure, then a positive relationship should be evident between shame-proneness in general and fear of failure in the achievement domain. The negative valence of both shame-proneness and fear of failure raises the possibility of finding a spurious relationship due to a negative response bias; thus, we controlled for neuroticism in our analyses.

##### *Method*

###### *PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE*

One hundred seventy-two (60 men, 112 women) undergraduates in an introductory-level psychology course participated for extra credit. Participants were informed that the study simply involved completing some questionnaires about themselves. They completed the questionnaires in three different sessions: a neuroticism measure was completed in a large group session, a shame proneness measure was completed in a sec-

ond large group session approximately 2 weeks later, and a fear of failure measure was completed in a take-home session approximately 5 weeks later.

#### MEASURES

*Fear of failure.* Houston and Kelly's (1987) nine-item Fear of Failure measure was used to assess fear of failure (e.g., "I often avoid a task because I am afraid that I will make mistakes"). Participants responded on a 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*) scale and scores were averaged to form the fear of failure index ( $\alpha = .66$ ).

*Neuroticism.* Eysenck, Eysenck, and Barrett's (1985) 12-item Neuroticism measure was used to assess neuroticism (e.g., "Would you call yourself tense or 'high strung'?"). Participants responded with no (1) or yes (2), and scores were averaged to form the neuroticism index ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Shame proneness.* The 15-item Shame Proneness measure from Tangney, Wagner, and Gramzow's (1992) Test of Self-Conscious Affect was used to assess shame proneness. The measure provides participants with scenarios ("You are driving down the road and you hit a small animal") and accompanying questions (e.g., "You would think: 'I'm terrible'"). Participants responded on a 1 (*not likely*) to 5 (*very likely*) scale, and the scores were averaged to form the shame proneness index ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

#### Results and Discussion

Preliminary simultaneous multiple regression analyses revealed no main or interactive influences of gender. Thus, gender was excluded from the main analyses and Pearson Product Moment Correlations were used to test the hypotheses.

As anticipated, shame proneness and fear failure were positively correlated,  $r = .29$  ( $p < .01$ ). To examine this relationship controlling for neuroticism, we removed the neuroticism variance from the shame proneness and fear of failure variables and computed the correlation between these residualized variables. The relationship remained significant,  $r = .22$  ( $p < .01$ ). Thus, fear of failure is associated with shame proneness and neuroticism does not account for this relationship.

#### PRIMARY STUDY

The pilot study provided evidence for a link between the tendency to experience shame in general and fear of failure. Study 1 was designed to directly examine our first hypothesis that individuals high in fear of failure will experience more shame upon failure than those low in fear of failure. This study was conducted in the naturalistic environment of the college classroom, with the focal achievement task being students' midterm examination for the course. Participants completed a fear of failure

measure, took the midterm exam, received performance feedback, and then reported their emotional response immediately thereafter.

Support for our first hypothesis would be indicated by a significant interaction between fear of failure and perceived performance on shame. Specifically, fear of failure was expected to be a positive predictor of shame for those who perceived that they had performed poorly but was expected to be unrelated to shame for those who perceived that they had performed well. Data on several additional indicators of negative affect besides shame also were acquired. This was done for two interrelated purposes. First, we sought to establish shame as the distinct emotion associated with fear of failure. Second, we sought to rule out the possibility that a negative response bias could account for the obtained results (i.e., that individuals willing to report fear of failure also would be willing to report shame and any other negative emotion).

#### Method

##### PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

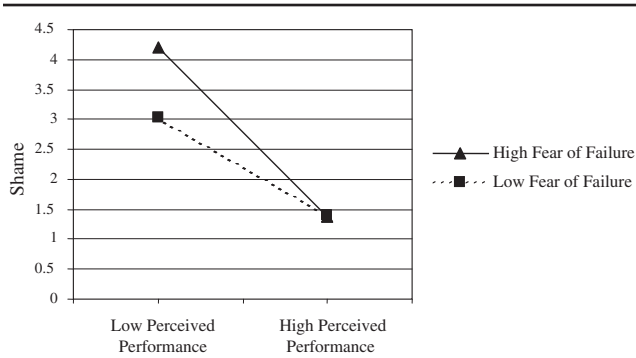
One hundred seventy-nine (64 men, 115 women) undergraduates in an introductory-level psychology course participated for extra credit. Participants were an average age of 19.8 years old, were predominantly sophomores (45%) or juniors (24%), and were predominantly Caucasian (77%).

At the beginning of the semester, participants completed a fear of failure measure in a large group session. Eight weeks later, participants completed their midterm examination and received performance feedback 9 days later. This feedback included their score on the exam, along with the overall mean, standard deviation, and a normatively based grading scale for the exam. Immediately following receipt of the feedback, participants rated their perceived performance on the exam. Participants then rated the extent to which they were currently experiencing shame, guilt, embarrassment, shyness, and distress as a function of their exam performance.

##### MEASURES

*Fear of failure.* Houston and Kelly's (1987) Fear of Failure measure was used to assess fear of failure ( $\alpha = .55$ ).

*Perceived performance.* Three items were used to assess perceived performance on the exam. Participants responded to two items ("I think I did very well on the exam" and "I think that I got a very good grade on the exam") on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale and responded to a third item ("How do you think you did on the exam?") by circling one of four options (*very poorly*, *somewhat poorly*, *somewhat well*, or *very well*). The scores for each item were standardized and averaged to form the perceived performance index ( $\alpha = .97$ ).



**Figure 1** Study 1: Shame as a function of fear of failure and perceived performance.

*Shame, guilt, embarrassment, shyness, and distress.* Subscales from the Differential Emotions Scale (DES; Izard, 1971) were used to assess shame, guilt, embarrassment, shyness, and distress. Each subscale consists of three items (shame, e.g., *ashamed*; guilt, e.g., *guilty*; embarrassment, e.g., *embarrassed*; shyness, e.g., *shy*; and distress, e.g., *discouraged*). Participants rated the extent to which each adjective described how they felt “right now” on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) scale, and scores for each subscale were averaged to form the shame ( $\alpha = .91$ ), guilt ( $\alpha = .88$ ), embarrassment ( $\alpha = .83$ ), shyness ( $\alpha = .87$ ), and distress ( $\alpha = .93$ ) indices. In addition, the guilt, embarrassment, shyness, and distress indices were averaged to form an omnibus negative emotion index.

### Results and Discussion

#### OVERVIEW

Preliminary simultaneous multiple regression analyses revealed no main or interactive influences of gender. Thus, gender was excluded from the main analyses.

Simultaneous multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses. The basic model for the regression analyses was composed of fear of failure (mean-centered), perceived performance (mean-centered), and the Fear of Failure  $\times$  Perceived Performance interaction. Simple effects analyses (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) were used to examine the specific nature of observed interactions.

Two sets of analyses also were run to address issues concerning emotion specificity and negative response bias. The first set consisted of five separate analyses in which the shame index was regressed on the basic model with one of the alternative emotion variables (guilt, embarrassment, shyness, distress, omnibus negative emotion) included in the regression equation. The second set consisted of five separate analyses in which each of the alternative emotion indices were regressed on the

**TABLE 1:** Study 1: Regression Coefficients of Each of Five Alternative Emotions Predicting Shame and for the Interaction of Fear of Failure and Perceived Performance Predicting Shame

Alternative Emotion	Regression Coefficient for Alternative Emotion	Regression Coefficient for Fear of Failure $\times$ Perceived Performance
Guilt	.45**	.13**
Embarrassment	.57**	.11**
Shyness	.37**	.13**
Distress	.64**	.11**
Omnibus negative emotion	.68**	.09*

NOTE: Regression coefficients are standardized.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

basic model with the shame variable included in the regression equation.

#### MAIN ANALYSES<sup>2</sup>

The regression of shame on the basic model revealed that fear of failure was a positive predictor,  $\beta = .18$ ,  $F(1, 175) = 11.62$ ,  $p < .01$ , and perceived performance was a negative predictor,  $\beta = -.69$ ,  $F(1, 175) = 173.50$ ,  $p < .01$ . Most important, the Fear of Failure  $\times$  Perceived Performance interaction was also significant,  $\beta = -.18$ ,  $F(1, 175) = 12.25$ ,  $p < .01$ . This interaction is displayed in Figure 1. Simple effects analyses revealed that fear of failure was a positive predictor of shame for those who perceived that they had performed poorly,  $t(175) = 20.38$ ,  $p < .01$ , but was unrelated to shame for those who perceived that they had performed well,  $t(175) = -.34$ , *ns*.

Shame was then regressed on the basic model in five separate analyses with each including one of the alternative emotion variables in the equation. Each alternative emotion was a significant predictor of shame in these analyses; however, the Fear of Failure  $\times$  Perceived Performance interaction remained significant in each instance. The regression coefficients for each emotion variable and for the focal interaction are presented in Table 1. Next, each of the alternative emotion variables were regressed on the basic model with shame included in the equation. The Fear of Failure  $\times$  Perceived Performance interaction was not significant in any of these analyses (all  $ps > .50$ ).

The results of this study provide direct support for our first hypothesis. Individuals high in fear of failure reported more shame upon a perceived failure experience than did individuals low in fear of failure. Furthermore, shame was shown to be the distinct emotional outcome of perceived failure for those high in fear of failure, and the obtained results did not appear to be a mere function of a negative response bias.

## STUDY 2

*Pilot Study*

Prior to directly testing our second and third hypotheses in Study 2, we conducted a pilot study that examined the relationship between participants' reports of parental shaming in achievement situations during childhood and their fear of failure. If, indeed, shame is both grounded in relational concerns and is the emotional core of fear of failure, then reports of parental shaming in achievement situations should be linked to fear of failure. To address the possibility of a response bias creating a spurious relationship between the focal measures, we used impression management as a control variable in our analyses.

*Method**PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE*

Two hundred (91 men, 109 women) undergraduates in an introductory-level psychology course participated for extra credit. Participants were informed that the study simply involved completing some questionnaires about themselves and their parents. They completed the questionnaires in three different sessions: a fear of failure measure was completed twice (to enhance reliability), once in a take-home session and again in a large group session approximately 3 months later; mother and father shaming measures were completed in a take-home session approximately 6 weeks after the initial fear of failure assessment; and the impression management measure was completed in the same take-home session as the initial fear of failure measure.

*MEASURES*

*Fear of failure.* Houston and Kelly's (1987) Fear of Failure measure was used to assess fear of failure. Participants' scores were aggregated across two assessments ( $r = .69$ ) and averaged to form the fear of failure index ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Impression management.* The 20-item Impression Management measure from Paulhus's (1991) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding was used to assess impression management (e.g., "I always obey laws, even if I am unlikely to get caught"). Participants rated each item on a 1 (*not true*) to 7 (*very true*) scale and, after reverse-scoring, participants received one point for each extreme (6 or 7) response. Participants' scores were averaged to form the impression management index ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Parental shaming.* The four-item shame scale from Bempechat, Graham, and Jimenez's (1999) Educational Socialization Scale was used to assess parental shaming (e.g., "She/he made me feel ashamed if I did badly in

school or in other things I tried"). Participants were instructed to think back to when they were a young child in completing the items for their mother and father separately. Participants responded on a 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) scale, and scores were averaged for each parent to form the mother shaming ( $\alpha = .97$ ) and father shaming ( $\alpha = .97$ ) indices.

*Results and Discussion*

Preliminary simultaneous multiple regression analyses revealed a positive relationship between gender and fear of failure in each analysis ( $\beta$ s ranged from .22 to .25,  $p$ s < .01), indicating that women had higher fear of failure than men. No gender interactions were observed. Thus, the main, but not interactive, influence of gender was included in the main analyses, and simultaneous multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses.

As anticipated, both mother shaming and father shaming were positive predictors of fear failure,  $\beta = .28$ ,  $F(1, 195) = 17.06$ ,  $p < .01$ , and  $\beta = .20$ ,  $F(1, 192) = 8.12$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively. To examine this relationship controlling for impression management, we removed the impression management variance from the parental shaming and fear of failure variables and then conducted the regressions with these residualized variables. Both relationships remained significant,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $F(1, 194) = 8.12$ ,  $p < .01$ , and  $\beta = .19$ ,  $F(1, 191) = 7.56$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively. Thus, fear of failure is associated with mother and father shaming, and impression management does not account for these relationships.

## PRIMARY STUDY

One purpose of Study 2 was to replicate the results of Study 1 in a controlled laboratory experiment. In Study 1, it was necessary to rely on participants' perceived performance because nearly any score on the midterm exam may have been considered a success to one student and a failure to another. This feature of the study was valuable in that it demonstrated the real-world applicability of the findings, but documenting the robustness of the results with regard to objective success and failure experiences would further establish the fear of failure-shame link. As such, in Study 2, fear of failure was assessed prior to an experimental session in which participants solved anagrams and were randomly assigned to a success or failure condition.

In Study 1, shame was found to be the distinct outcome of the interaction between fear of failure and perceived performance when controlling for other negative emotions. A question that remains is whether individuals high in fear of failure feel more shame under conditions of failure than they do in general. This question was addressed in Study 2 by assessing participants' general

tendencies to experience shame prior to the experimental session and controlling these general shame tendencies in the data analysis.

Study 2 also was designed to examine the second and third hypotheses of the present research. Specifically, overgeneralization and relational concerns were assessed after participants' encountered success or failure, and participants high in fear of failure who experienced failure were predicted to exhibit more overgeneralization and greater relational concerns than those low in fear of failure.

### Method

#### PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Eighty-four (25 men, 59 women) undergraduates in an introductory-level psychology course participated for extra credit. Participants were recruited from a larger pool of individuals who completed a fear of failure measure in a mass-testing session.<sup>3</sup> Participants were an average age of 19.7 years old, were predominantly sophomores (42%) or juniors (28%), and were predominantly Caucasian (69%).

Three weeks after the mass-testing, participants attended a large group session in which they completed the fear of failure measure again, along with a general measure of shame, a general measure of overgeneralization, and a measure of perceived closeness to their mother and father. Each participant was then run in an individual experimental session, conducted a minimum of 2 weeks after the large group session.

In the experimental session, the experimenter was blind to participants' fear of failure level and success/failure condition. Upon entering the lab, participants were seated in front of a computer monitor and were told that the experiment was the final stage in the development of a "lexical decision computer protocol" that presents anagrams and provides feedback about anagram performance. The experimenter briefly described the anagram task (see below for details), informed participants that the computer program would take them through the session, and then exited the lab. In introducing the session and describing the achievement task, the task itself was the primary focus; no attempt was made to enhance the salience of ability or to link task performance to an important ability.

The computer program guided participants through the anagram task; success and failure conditions were established by varying anagram difficulty (see below for details). Upon completion of the anagram task, participants were instructed to complete a posttask questionnaire located in an envelope next to the computer. This questionnaire assessed posttask shame, posttask overgeneralization, posttask perceived closeness to parents, and likelihood to tell parents. The end of the ques-

tionnaire contained manipulation check items and instructions to place the questionnaire in an envelope prior to giving it to the experimenter. Upon reentering the lab, the experimenter debriefed participants, provided them with extra credit, and thanked them for their participation.

#### ANAGRAM TASK AND SUCCESS/FAILURE MANIPULATION

The anagram task was introduced on a series of computer screens that participants could read through at their own pace. As part of the introduction to the task, participants were given a practice set of three-letter anagrams to solve. Once this introduction was complete, participants were instructed that the real anagram task consisted of solving five-letter anagrams randomly selected from a large pool of possibilities. Actually, participants had been assigned to a success or failure condition prior to arriving for the experiment. The success condition presented participants with 16 easy anagrams, 2 hard anagrams, and 2 unsolvable anagrams, whereas the failure condition presented participants with 9 difficult anagrams, 2 easy anagrams, and 9 unsolvable anagrams. All participants were informed that they would have 10 min to solve 20 anagrams (see Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995; Dutton & Brown, 1997, for similar success/failure manipulations).

Each anagram was presented in the center of the computer screen and participants were instructed to type the solution in a text box that appeared below the anagram. For each anagram, participants could (a) solve it, (b) temporarily pass on it by typing "pass" in the text box, or (c) eliminate it by typing "drop" in the text box. At the end of 10 min, or when all 20 anagrams had been solved or dropped, a "pop-up" box informed participants that they had completed the task and that they should press the space bar to continue. Participants were then shown the number of anagrams that they solved correctly and were informed that they had either performed better than 31% of college students in the area (failure condition; coded 0) or better than 91% of college students in the area (success condition; coded 1).

#### MEASURES

*Fear of failure.* Houston and Kelly's (1987) Fear of Failure measure was used to assess fear of failure. Participants' scores were aggregated across two assessments ( $r = .68$ ) and averaged to form the fear of failure index ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

*General and posttask shame.* The shame subscale of the DES (Izard, 1971) was used to assess posttask shame ( $\alpha = .87$ ). To assess general shame, the instructions for the original measure were simply reworded to apply "in general" ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

*General and posttask overgeneralization.* The seven-item overgeneralization subscale of Carver and Ganellen's (1983) Attitudes Toward Self Scale was used to assess participants' general tendency toward overgeneralization. The items on the measure focus on the extent to which failures or mistakes are generalized to, and influence perceptions of, the self (e.g., "How I feel about myself overall is easily influenced by a single mistake"). Participants responded to the items using a 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*extremely characteristic of me*) scale and scores were averaged to form the general overgeneralization index ( $\alpha = .92$ ). To assess posttask overgeneralization, the original items were simply reworded to apply to the specific performance situation and participants responded using a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

*General and posttask perceived closeness to parents.* Perceived closeness to mother and perceived closeness to father were assessed using a single item for each parent ("How close do you feel to your mother/father?"). Participants responded to the mother and father items using a 1 (*not at all close*) to 7 (*very close*) scale, and attention was focused on closeness in general or closeness at present for the general and posttask measures, respectively.

*Likelihood to tell parents.* Likelihood to tell mother and likelihood to tell father were assessed using a single item for each parent ("If you were to talk to your mother/father tonight, how likely would you be to tell her/him about your performance on the task?"). Participants responded to the mother and father items using a 1 (*not at all likely*) to 7 (*very likely*) scale.

*Manipulation checks.* Participants reported the number of anagrams that they correctly solved to ensure that the manipulation of success and failure was effective. The perceived performance measure used in Study 2 was used in this study as a second way to test the efficacy of the manipulation.

## Results and Discussion

### OVERVIEW

Preliminary simultaneous multiple regression analyses revealed a positive relationship between gender and perceived closeness to father ( $\beta = -.27, p < .05$ ), indicating that men had higher perceptions of closeness to father than did women. No gender interactions were observed. Thus, the main effect of gender was included in the perceived closeness to father analysis, but all other main and interactive effects of gender were excluded. Simultaneous multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses. The basic model for the regression analyses was composed of fear of failure (mean-centered), success/failure condition (mean-centered), and the Fear of Fail-

ure  $\times$  Success/Failure interaction. The general version of the dependent measure was included in the regression equation when applicable. Simple effects analyses were used to examine the specific nature of observed interactions.

Of the 84 individuals who participated in the study, 4 persons expressed suspicion regarding the nature of the experiment, and their data were thus discarded. Each of these individuals (two from the success condition and two from the failure condition) revealed during debriefing that they thought the anagram task was designed to manipulate success or failure. Of the 80 participants whose data were used in Study 2, 3 did not report general closeness to mother, 4 did not report general closeness to father, and 3 did not report likelihood to tell father.

Two analyses documented the efficacy of the success/failure manipulation. First, participants' reports of the number of correctly solved anagrams were significantly different between the success ( $M = 15.90$ ) and failure ( $M = 4.21$ ) conditions,  $t(77) = 28.28, p < .01$ . Second, participants' perceived performance was significantly different between the success ( $M = .79$ ) and failure ( $M = -.79$ ) conditions,  $t(78) = 12.66, p < .01$ .

### MAIN ANALYSES

*Shame.* Posttask shame was regressed on the basic model with general shame also in the equation. The analysis revealed a significant effect for general shame,  $\beta = .44, F(1, 75) = 26.81, p < .01$ , and for fear of failure,  $\beta = .37, F(1, 75) = 8.39, p < .01$ , indicating that participants high in general shame reported more posttask shame than those low in general shame and that those high in fear of failure reported more posttask shame than those low in fear of failure. In addition, a significant effect for success/failure condition was found,  $\beta = -.43, F(1, 75) = 26.51, p < .01$ , such that participants in the failure condition reported feeling more posttask shame than those in the success condition. Most important, the Fear of Failure  $\times$  Success/Failure interaction was significant,  $\beta = -.25, F(1, 75) = 3.97, p \leq .05$ . This interaction is displayed in Figure 2. Simple effects analyses revealed that fear of failure was a positive predictor of posttask shame for those in the failure condition,  $t(75) = 23.50, p < .01$ , but was unrelated to posttask shame in the success condition,  $t(75) = 1.50, ns$ . These findings replicate those obtained in Study 1 and provide further support for the fear of failure–shame link.

*Overgeneralization.* Posttask overgeneralization was regressed on the basic model with general overgeneralization also in the equation. The analysis revealed significant effects for general overgeneralization,  $\beta = .31, F(1, 75) = 7.11, p < .01$ , fear of failure,  $\beta = .49, F(1, 75) = 10.40, p < .01$ , and success/failure condition,  $\beta = -.31, F(1, 75) = 12.03, p < .01$ . These main effects indicate that



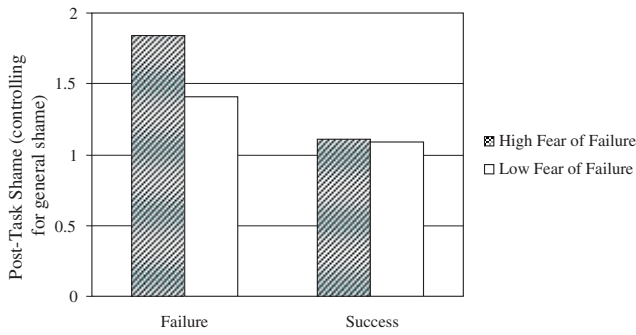


Figure 2 Study 2: Posttask shame (controlling for general shame) as a function of fear of failure and success/failure condition.

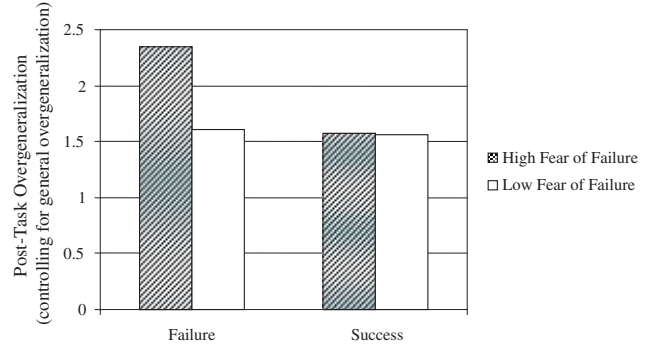


Figure 3 Study 2: Posttask overgeneralization (controlling for general overgeneralization) as a function of fear of failure and success/failure condition.

participants generally high in overgeneralization reported more posttask overgeneralization than those generally low in overgeneralization, that those high in fear of failure reported more posttask overgeneralization than those low in fear of failure, and that those in the failure condition reported more posttask overgeneralization than those in the success condition. Most important, the Fear of Failure  $\times$  Success/Failure interaction was significant,  $\beta = -.35$ ,  $F(1, 75) = 7.25$ ,  $p < .01$ . This interaction is displayed in Figure 3. Simple effects analyses revealed that fear of failure was a positive predictor of posttask overgeneralization for those in the failure condition,  $t(75) = 17.07$ ,  $p < .01$ , but was unrelated to posttask overgeneralization for those in the success condition,  $t(75) = .29$ , *ns*. These findings provide support for our second hypothesis.

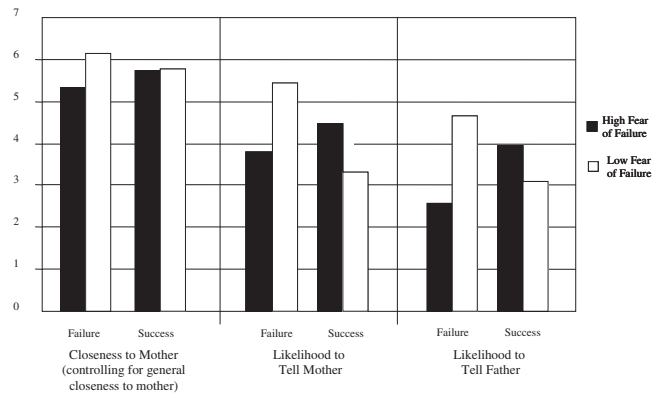


Figure 4 Study 2: Posttask closeness to mother (controlling for general closeness to mother), posttask likelihood to tell mother, and posttask likelihood to tell father as a function of fear of failure and success/failure condition.

*Perceived closeness to mother and father.* Posttask perceived closeness to mother and father were each regressed on the basic model with general perceived closeness to the relevant parent also in the equation. The mother analysis revealed a significant effect for general perceived closeness,  $\beta = .80$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 135.63$ ,  $p < .01$ , and fear of failure,  $\beta = -.28$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 9.75$ ,  $p < .01$ , indicating that participants who in general reported feeling close to their mother reported feeling close to their mother after the anagram task and that those high in fear failure reported feeling less close to their mother after the anagram task. Most important, the Fear of Failure  $\times$  Success/Failure interaction was also significant,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 4.56$ ,  $p < .05$ . This interaction is displayed in Figure 4. Simple effects analyses revealed that fear of failure was a negative predictor of posttask perceived closeness to mother for those in the failure condition,  $t(72) = -13.73$ ,  $p < .01$ , but was unrelated to posttask perceived closeness to mother for those in the success condition,  $t(72) = -.45$ , *ns*.

The father analysis revealed significant effects for general perceived father closeness,  $\beta = .88$ ,  $F(1, 70) =$

271.94,  $p < .01$ , fear of failure,  $\beta = -.18$ ,  $F(1, 70) = 5.84$ ,  $p < .05$ , and gender,  $\beta = -.11$ ,  $F(1, 70) = 4.34$ ,  $p < .05$ . These main effects indicate that participants who in general reported feeling close to their father reported feeling close to their father after the anagram task, that those high in fear of failure reported feeling less close to their father after the anagram task, and that men reported feeling more close to their father after the anagram task than did women. The Fear of Failure  $\times$  Success/Failure interaction did not significantly predict posttask perceived closeness to father.

*Likelihood to tell mother and father.* Likelihood to tell mother and father were each regressed on the basic model. The mother analysis revealed a significant effect for fear of failure,  $\beta = -.38$ ,  $F(1, 76) = 6.02$ ,  $p < .05$ , indicating that participants high in fear of failure reported being less likely to tell their mother about their performance on the anagram task. Most important, this main effect was qualified by a significant Fear of Failure  $\times$

Success/Failure interaction,  $\beta = .48$ ,  $F(1, 76) = 9.47$ ,  $p < .01$ . This interaction is displayed in Figure 4. Simple effects analyses revealed that fear of failure was a negative predictor of likelihood to tell mother in the failure condition,  $t(76) = -4.49$ ,  $p < .01$ , and was a positive predictor in the success condition,  $t(76) = 3.75$ ,  $p < .01$ .

A corresponding set of findings was revealed for likelihood to tell fathers. The father regression revealed a significant effect of fear of failure,  $\beta = -.49$ ,  $F(1, 73) = 9.70$ ,  $p < .01$ , indicating that participants high in fear of failure reported being less likely to tell their father about their performance on the anagram task. Most important, the analyses revealed a significant Fear of Failure  $\times$  Success/Failure interaction,  $\beta = .50$ ,  $F(1, 73) = 10.27$ ,  $p < .01$ . This interaction is displayed in Figure 4. Simple effects analyses revealed that fear of failure was a negative predictor of likelihood to tell father in the failure condition,  $t(73) = -5.51$ ,  $p < .01$ , and was a positive predictor in the success condition,  $t(73) = 2.51$ ,  $p < .05$ . These findings for the indicators of relational concern provide support for our third hypothesis.

#### SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSES

Supplementary analyses were conducted in which each of the primary analyses was repeated, replacing the success/failure condition variable with (a) the number of correctly solved anagrams reported by participants and (b) the perceived performance index. In all cases, the findings obtained in these analyses were as strong as or stronger than those reported for the primary analyses.

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results from the present studies provide the first empirical support for the proposition that shame is the core emotion of fear of failure. Our pilot work prior to each study documented a positive relationship between shame proneness and fear of failure and between parental shaming and fear of failure. More important, each of our three primary hypotheses based on the shame–fear of failure link received strong support from the data.

Both Study 1 and Study 2 provided evidence in support of our first hypothesis. In each study, individuals high in fear of failure reported greater shame upon failure than those low in fear of failure. These findings were obtained (a) in both naturalistic (Study 1) and controlled laboratory (Study 2) settings, (b) using two different achievement tasks: a midterm exam (Study 1) and anagrams (Study 2), (c) for both perceived (Study 1) and objective (Study 2) failure experiences, and (d) controlling for other negative emotions (Study 1) and general shame tendencies (Study 2).

Study 2 provided evidence in support of our second and third hypotheses. Individuals high in fear of failure were more likely to generalize a specific failure experi-

ence to the global self than those low in fear of failure. This finding was obtained controlling for characteristic overgeneralization tendencies. Individuals high in fear of failure were also more likely to evidence relational concerns upon failure than were those low in fear of failure. More precisely, high fear of failure participants, relative to low fear of failure participants, reported feeling less close to their mother after failure (controlling for general closeness to mother), reported that they would be less likely to tell their mother and father about their failure experience, and reported that they would be more likely to tell their mother and father about their success experience.

#### *Attributional Processes in Fear of Failure*

Attributional conceptualizations of achievement motivation have long recognized the inimical effects of attributing failure to incompetence or a lack of ability (Kukla, 1972; Weiner, 1986). These conceptualizations, unlike domain-general attributional models (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), have largely ignored the global-specific dimension of attributional processes (for an exception, see Feather & Tiggemann, 1984). The overgeneralization finding in the present research highlights the importance of attending to this neglected dimension. Specifically, the overgeneralization finding suggests that for those high in fear of failure, failure attributions are extremely global in that they extend beyond not only the specific achievement event and the achievement domain in general but to general perceptions of the self. To date, empirical work in the achievement motivation literature has focused primarily on the way in which attributions for failure impact achievement outcomes such as subsequent persistence and performance (for reviews, see Covington, 1992; Heckhausen, 1991; Weiner, 1989). Given the (over)general nature of the failure attributions made by those high in fear of failure, it is likely that for these individuals, failure has implications beyond the achievement domain to outcomes such as overall psychological and physical well-being. Future research would do well to examine this possibility.

Several other types of attributions have received significant research attention in achievement settings, one of the foremost being effort attributions (Covington & Omelich, 1979; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Effort attributions for failure have been shown to produce guilt (Russell & McCauly, 1986; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978), and it is interesting to note that guilt is often contrasted with shame in the emotion literature. Shame is presumed to involve a focus on the global self and is thought to initiate avoidance tendencies, whereas guilt is presumed to focus on the failure event specifically and is thought to evoke approach tendencies aimed at reparation (H. B. Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Thus,

guilt would appear to be a far less insidious negative emotion than shame in achievement settings. Specifically, shame leads to fear of failure, global self-devaluation, and associated avoidance processes, whereas guilt does not lead to fear of failure, focuses on the event rather than the self, and supports approach processes.

Our results from Study 1 (in which guilt was found to be unrelated to fear of failure when shame was taken into account) are consistent with this analysis, although clearly additional research is needed to document that experiencing guilt due to an effort attribution for failure has positive, appetitive implications. At minimum, on the basis of the preceding discussion it seems reasonable to contend that shame and guilt should be considered independently in research on achievement-relevant emotion, a contention that runs contrary to that espoused by some attribution theorists (see Weiner et al., 1978). It is also interesting to note that our results seem to conflict with the hypothesis that shame is linked to ideal self-guides/promotion motivation and that love withdrawal socialization processes result in ideal self-guide regulation/promotion motivation (see Higgins & Silberman, 1998). Further research is clearly needed to investigate these apparent conflicts.

#### *Relational Processes in Fear of Failure*

Perhaps the most intriguing findings of the present research are those linking fear of failure to relational issues. This connection was displayed most clearly with regard to maternal relations: High fear of failure participants felt less close to their mother after failure and reported being less likely to tell their mother about their failure experience. These results are consistent with Baldwin and colleagues' work demonstrating that the repeated pairing of failure and rejection leads to a relational schema of the sort "IF I fail, THEN my parent will reject me" (Baldwin & Meunier, 1999; Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996). These results are also in accord with recent work in our own lab demonstrating that insecure attachment (both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance) are associated with fear of failure (Elliot & Reis, 2003) and that mothers pass their fear of failure along to their children through the use of love withdrawal in socialization (Elliot & Thrash, 2004). The general pattern that is emerging from these studies is that fear of failure is not simply a competence-based motive disposition but inherently involves relational considerations. In fear of failure and, most likely, in other forms of avoidance motivation in achievement situations (e.g., avoidance goals, self-protective cognitive strategies), achievement and affiliation appear to be closely commingled (see Elliot & Church, 2003; Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

In the present research, high fear of failure individuals reported being less likely to tell their father about their failure experience but did not report feeling less close to their father after failure. In similar fashion, Elliot and Thrash (2004) found that fathers pass their fear of failure along to their children but that love withdrawal does not play a mediational role in this intergenerational transmission for father-child pairs. Thus, fathers, similar to mothers, appear to play an important role in the emergence of fear of failure in their children, but the precise nature of this influence is more difficult to document for fathers than it is for mothers. This lack of clarity with regard to fathers should not be surprising because empirical results for fathers (both in terms of direct reports from fathers and in terms of children's reports about their fathers) are often less straightforward than those for mothers (see Garber, Robinson, & Valentiner, 1997; Serbin & Stack, 1998). Acquiring a more perspicacious view of *how* fathers instill fear of failure in their children is clearly an important item on the research agenda.

It is interesting to note that high fear of failure individuals not only report being less likely to tell their mother and father about their failure experience but they also report being more likely to tell their mother and father about their success experience. It is not clear whether high fear of failure individuals *proactively* pursue success (as well as *reactively* seek to avoid failure) or whether they simply utilize the opportunity to present their parents with success information when it becomes available. Indeed, it is likely that those high in fear of failure do not regulate in terms of "success" at all but construe positive feedback in terms of "nonfailure" (Birney et al., 1969). From this standpoint, our findings indicate that high fear of failure participants would be less likely to inform their parents that they failed and would be more likely to reassure their parents that they did not fail. This highlights an important structural feature of avoidance-based motives (and other motivational constructs) that explains, in part, why they are so deleterious: The best outcome they afford is the absence of a negative outcome (e.g., the absence of a failure, see Elliot & Church, 1997; Higgins, 1997; Mowrer, 1960).

Although our research documented important links between fear of failure and shame processes, it did not shed light on the specific way in which the shame experience, global negative attributions, and relational concerns are linked to avoidance motivation in achievement situations. For example, do persons high in fear of failure experience anticipatory shame in achievement situations that in turn triggers failure avoidance? Do the relational concerns of those high in fear of failure have a specific focus or are they diffuse?

Another set of questions raised by the present research is the precise nature of the relationship between general shame proneness and fear of failure. For example, in achievement situations, do general shame proneness and fear of failure have the same influence on affect, cognition, and behavior? Are individuals high in fear of failure more likely to experience shame in other, nonachievement situations? These complex questions warrant additional research.

### Limitations

In discussing the findings of our pilot work and of Study 1, we proceeded under the assumption that the relationships observed were causal in nature. The results of these studies are correlational, however, and it is thus not possible to make unequivocal statements regarding causality. Also, the present research was conducted with undergraduates and the extent to which the findings generalize to other age groups and to the general populace is not yet known.

### Conclusions

Documenting the central place of shame in fear of failure may be viewed as an important milestone in our understanding of this motive disposition. Atkinson's (1957) proposition that shame underlies fear of failure has been a part of the literature for many years, but until the present research, this proposition had not been empirically documented. In addition, prior to the present work, achievement motivation theorists had not fully considered the conceptual implications of linking fear of failure to shame. In doing so herein, we feel that we have acquired a deeper, more comprehensive portrait of fear of failure that helps explain why it exerts such an inimical influence in achievement situations. For individuals high in fear of failure, achievement events are not simply opportunities to learn, improve on one's competence, or compete against others. Instead, they are threatening, judgment-oriented experiences that put one's entire self on the line (see Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Kernis, 2003, for conceptual parallels) and that put one's sense of relational security in jeopardy (Elliot & Reis, 2003). In short, they are potentially shameful events.

Shame is a painful emotion, and thus, it is not surprising that individuals high in fear of failure orient to and seek to avoid failure in achievement situations. Indeed, when possible, such individuals seek to select themselves out of achievement situations in the first place. Ironically, and poignantly, in so doing, those high in fear of failure keep themselves from the mistakes and failures that many achievement motivation theorists view as the grist for the mill of competence development (Cov-

ington, 1992; Dweck, 1999; Elliot, 1997). In essence, the avoidance of mistakes and failures stunts the growth and maturation of persons high in fear of failure, which, over time, merely leads to more mistakes and failures. As such, the avoidance of failure is likely to be a self-perpetuating process in that the very process of avoiding failure is likely to serve a role in maintaining and exacerbating the tendency to avoid failure (Heckhausen, 1975). Clearly, an important avenue for future work is to find a way to interrupt this downward spiral—to teach those who define failure as a shameful event that failure is actually a natural part of the learning and growth process.

### NOTES

1. The data for pilot Study 1 were collected in the context of a larger project. None of the analyses or findings reported in the text have been reported in prior work.
2. In Studies 1 and 2, the overall models accounted for significant variance in each of the regressions (all  $ps < .01$ ), and the overall  $R^2$ s ranged from .14 to .82.
3. Recruitment was based on individuals' fear of failure scores; those with scores clearly above or below the sample mean were recruited for participation.

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