

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275542142>

# University Students' Fear of Success from the Perspective of Positive Psychology

Article in *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* · May 2013

DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.04.384

---

CITATIONS

9

READS

206

1 author:



[Elena Stanculescu](#)

University of Bucharest

30 PUBLICATIONS 317 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



School Engagement Internationally [View project](#)



Resilient Educational Communities [View project](#)

PSIWORLD 2012

# University Students' Fear of Success from the Perspective of Positive Psychology

Elena Stanculescu\*

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, Panduri street, 061071, Bucharest, Romania*

---

## Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine university students' fear of success from the perspective of positive psychology. Two objectives were addressed: first, analysing the relation between fear of success, optimism, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and search for meaning in life; second, exploring the variance of the fear of success, taking into account the affective dimension of the self (self-esteem) and search for meaning in life. The results confirmed that fear of success was positively related to search for meaning, and negatively to optimism, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. The variance of the fear of success was explained by the self-esteem and search for meaning in life. Implications for school psychologists were discussed.

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).  
Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of PSIWORLD 2012

*Keywords:* university students' fear of success, self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, search of meaning in life;

---

## 1. Introduction

The concept of fear of success was introduced in the literature by Martina Horner (1972). She considered that fear of success is more specific to the women, being originated in their' perceptions on negative consequences for their achievement in traditionally male domains. Moreover, she pointed out that women are conflicted when they have competences and interests that could be against their stereotypical internalized gender role. It could be asserted that Horner's approach of fear of success is based upon the framework of expectancy-value theory of motivation. The expectancy of negative effects of success in achievement situations contributes to the growing of fear of success, which in turn inhibits performances and level of aspirations. Horner's research results were replicated by Rothman (1996), who showed that female managers facing more fear of success than male, because of the impacts of gender role stereotypes. New findings deepen the understanding of this psychological construct, emphasizing the interplay between intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects, male and women confronting with

---

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [elistapsy@yahoo.com](mailto:elistapsy@yahoo.com)

fear of success. Effects of success were conceptualized in terms of social and emotional consequences: expectation of loss of connection in terms of community, friends or family. Ivers and Downes (2011) considered that children perceive achieving success as a phenomenon whose direct consequences are alienation and isolation. Being successful signifies in fact the possibility of being target for the hostile and envy peers. Sense of belonging is threatened by the expectation of loss of connection. The performance is disrupted by this ambivalent tendency for striving for success and fear of success. Individuals, who experience fear of success, having at the same time achievement orientation, could experience self-defeating tendencies to protect themselves from expectations generated by the uncertainty of goals' attainment. These tendencies could impact opportunity to succeed. Thus, the benefit related to success seems to be more stressful than a less-prized alternative. The final result is that the natural need to strive for success is masked or inhibited by the fear of success. The study of fear of success in the academic learning settings revealed the impact of the phenomenon of parental double-bind. It supposes that parents encourage children to compete but not to win, and to have goals, but not to achieve. Double-bind generates a conflict because of the paradox that could not be managed. Another social aspect related to the fear of success consists of the growing children in a climate in which winning is rarely rewarded and loosing is tough penalized (zero tolerance for the mistakes). Inquiries developed by the neuropsychologists emphasized that reactions to situations or expectations of success suppose interplay between psychological and physiological aspects. For some people, experiences of success are uncomfortable, because of the state closed to the feeling of arousal they experienced during a traumatic event. Thus, physiological reactions similar to those elicited by trauma, determine people to avoid to be themselves subject of such arousing inducing circumstances, which in turn causes them to keep themselves away from these situations or to have fear of success.

## **2. Objectives and hypotheses**

### *2.1. Objectives*

The purpose of this study was to examine university students' fear of success from the perspective of positive psychology. The following objectives were addressed: a) to explore the relationship between fear of success and optimism, self-esteem, self-efficacy, search of meaning in life; b) to model the relationship between fear of success, resources of the self, and search meaning, using regression analysis.

### *2.2. Hypotheses*

The hypotheses of the study were:

H1 – There is a negative relationship between fear of success, self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism; and a positive relationship with search of meaning in life.

H2 – The variance of the fear of success is explained by the self-esteem and search of meaning in life.

## **3. Method**

### *3.1. Participants*

A number of 197 university undergraduate students from the University of Bucharest were recruited from educational psychology classes to participate in the present research. There were 118 girls and 79 boys, whose mean age ranged from 19 to 22 years (Mean = 20.12, SD = 1.46).

### *3.2. Measures*

The Fear of Success Scale (FOSS) developed by Zuckerman and Allison (1976) is a self-report measure of the motives to avoid success. The scale contains 27 items, each item consisting of a statement followed by a 7-point agree-disagree continuum. The theoretical range of scores is 27 to 189. Good internal consistency it was obtained in this research (Cronbach alpha .68).

The Life Orientation Test (LOT – Revised, Scheier and Carver, 1985) assesses individual differences in generalized optimism vs. pessimism. It is a 10-item scale, answers being assessed through a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = I disagree a lot; to 5 = I agree a lot). Higher scores on this scale reflect higher levels of optimism. The scores could range from 10 to 50. Cronbach alpha for estimated reliability was .81.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item Likert-type scale and answers have to be rated on a four-point scale – from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Five of the scale items have positively worded statements and five have negatively worded ones (e.g. “I am able to do things as well as most other people”; “I feel I do not have much to be proud of”). The scale measures state self-esteem by asking the respondents to reflect on their current feelings about him/her. The scores could range from 10 to 40. The coefficient Cronbach alpha of the ten-item scores was .84.

The General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES; Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 1995) is a psychometric scale that is designed to assess optimistic self-beliefs to cope with a variety of difficult demands in life. In contrast to other scales that were designed to assess optimism, this one explicitly refers to personal agency. The authors of this scale considered that self-efficacy represents a prospective and operative construct. The scale contains ten items (e.g. “It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals”, “When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions”) responses being assessed on the basis of a four-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 – not at all true to 4 – exactly true). The scores could range from 10 to 40. The coefficient Cronbach alpha of the ten-item scores was .89.

Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006), a 10-item scale which measures the presence of meaning (“My life has a clear sense of purpose”, “I understand my life’s meaning”) and search for meaning (“I am always searching for something that makes my life feel meaningful”, “I am always looking to find my life’s purpose”) using five items each. The answers are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true). The scores could range from 7 to 35 on each scale. The coefficient Cronbach alpha for the present sample was .79.

### 3.3. Procedure

The purpose of the research was discussed in general terms with the participants who accepted to respond to the survey packet. They were encouraged to look over the questionnaires before participating. The packet consisted of an informed consent form, a demographic information sheet, and the scales necessary to measure fear of success, self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, and search for meaning in life. All participants were informed that the data would be kept confidential, being used for research purposes only.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Descriptive statistics

Mean scores for the fear of success was lower than the midpoint ( $M = 91.76$ ,  $SD = 6.38$ , midpoint = 108), for the self-esteem was slightly above the midlevel ( $M = 27.57$ ,  $SD = 2.64$ , midpoint = 25), for the self-efficacy above the midlevel ( $M = 28.43$ ,  $SD = 4.43$ , midpoint = 25), for the optimism slightly lower than the midlevel ( $M = 28.78$ ,  $SD = 3.69$ , midpoint = 30), and for the search for meaning in life above the midpoint ( $M = 24.58$ ,  $SD = 4.79$ , midpoint = 21). The skewness and kurtosis values showed the normality and symmetry of the distribution.

#### 4.2. Psychological correlates of fear of success

Performing a bivariate correlational analysis, negative correlations were obtained between fear of success and self-esteem ( $r = -.37$ ;  $p < .01$ ), self-efficacy ( $r = -.21$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and optimism ( $r = -.30$ ;  $p < .01$ ) (as seen in the table 1). Pearson correlation coefficient among the fear of success and search for meaning showed a significant positive relation ( $r = .23$ ;  $p < .01$ ). According to Kotrlík and Williams (2003), the size effect confirmed the moderate correlation between fear of success and self-esteem (Cohen's  $d = .13$ ), optimism (Cohen's  $d = .09$ ) a small but significant correlation with search for meaning (Cohen's  $d = .05$ ), and self-efficacy (Cohen's  $d = .04$ ).

Table 1. Correlations between fear of success, self-esteem, and self-efficacy

	1	2	3	4	5
Fear of success	–				
Self-esteem	-.37**	–			
Self-efficacy	-.21**	.45**	–		
Optimism	-.30**	.43**	.29**	–	
Search for meaning	.23**	-.09	.08	-.10	–

#### 4.3. The regression analysis

The hypothesis made with respect to the variance of fear of success has been supported. To test the hypothesis a stepwise linear regression was performed, in which self-esteem was entered in the first step and search for meaning in the second step. The collinearity diagnostics confirmed that the independent variable (self-esteem) is not a linear function of other independent variable (search for meaning). Taking into consideration the values of the R Square and Sig F Change (for self-esteem R Square = .13,  $p < .001$ , for search for meaning in life R Square = .19,  $p < .01$ ) it can be asserted that the independent variables accounted for a significant amount of variance of the fear of success. These results imply that 19% of the variance of the fear of success is explained by the level of self-esteem and search for meaning.

#### 4.4. Discussion

The negative correlations between the fear of success and resources of the self (self-esteem and self-efficacy) and optimism could be explained by the tendency to inhibit the opportunity to succeed in the case of those people with fear of success. This tendency is necessary to protect them by the stress related to the prized situation (choosing instead a less-prized alternative, Ivers & Downes, 2011). It has been emphasized in the literature that individuals with fear of success engage in self-defeating behavior because of their uncertainty of the goals' attainment. It seems to be reasonable that this uncertainty reflects a low level of self-esteem and self-efficacy. The finding concerning the variance of fear of success by low self-esteem and search for meaning in life could be explained by the idea emphasized by the Steger et al., (2011) that those individuals who are involved in search for meaning in life are generally less satisfied with their lives, having low self-acceptance.

### 5. Conclusions

This research is focused on the study of the fear of success from the positive psychology perspective. It takes empirical support for the negative relation between fear of success and self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, and positive relation with search for meaning in life. Taking into consideration that those individuals with fear of

success engage in self-defeating behavior, inhibiting their goals' attainment, it is necessary that school psychologists have to help them to identify the psychological and social factors that contribute to such tendency. They have to be encouraged to compete and to win, to have goals and to achieve.

## References

- Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *51*, 1173–1182.
- Horner, M. (1972). Toward an Understanding of Achievement-Related Conflicts in Women. *Journal of Social Issues*, *28*, 157–175.
- Ivers, J., & Downes, P. (2011). A phenomenological reinterpretation of Horner's fear of success in terms of social class. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *27*, 369–388.
- Kotrlik, J. W., & Williams, H. A. (2003). The Incorporation of Effect Size in Information Technology, Learning, and Performance Research. *Information Technology, Learning and Performance Research Journal*, *21*, 35–42.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rothman, M. (1996). Fear of success among business students. *Psychological Reports*, *78*, 863–869.
- Scheier, M., & Carver, C. (1992). Effects of optimism on psychological and physical well-being: Theoretical overview and empirical update. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, *16*, 201–228.
- Schwarzer, R., & Jerusalem, M. (1995). Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale. In J. Weisman, S. Wright, & M. Johnston (Eds.), *Measures in health psychology. A user's portfolio. Causal and control beliefs* (pp. 35–37). Windsor, UK: NFER-Nelson.
- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *53*, 80–93.
- Steger, M. F., Oishi, S., & Kesehir, S. (2011). Is a life without meaning satisfying? The moderating role of the search for meaning in satisfaction with life judgments. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *6*, 173–180.
- Zuckerman, M., & Allisson, S. N. (1976). An objective measure of the fear of success. Construction and validation. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *40*, 422–430.